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VOL. 32 NO. 12

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DECEMBER 1958

Volume 32 Number 12

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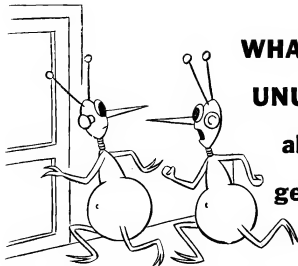
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WHY EXPLORE SPACE . . .

Considering that until about a year ago most Americans looked upon science fiction—if, indeed, they were familiar with the term at all—as a rather oddball item, it is uniquely satisfying to see how rapidly they have adjusted themselves to the Age of Space.

But at the same time this fast and astonishingly placid reaction to a scientific breakthrough of incalculable potential is also disquieting. For it seems to indicate first that, as a nation, we simply do not realize what the whole thing means. More significantly, it seems to indicate that as a nation we don't really care.

To a science fiction enthusiast, the prospect of a space-station satellite is not new. The plastic-domed cities on Luna, about which a famed astronomer wrote so breathlessly not long ago in one of our mass-circulation weekly magazines, are old hat to us. Interstellar flight we await with confidence. But to the mass of Americans upon whom all these prospects burst with inconceivable suddenness when the Russians put Sputnik into orbit, this should all be supremely stimulating, supremely exciting, supremely provocative.

But do we find anywhere an intelligent discussion of man's function in space, either interplanetary or interstellar? Has anyone raised the question of the Purpose? It seems to us that the time is fast approaching when a moment must be taken out from the launching of rockets and the training of space-pilots—a long moment in which the men who are devoting their lives and talents to getting man into space ponder the equally vital question of why man is going there.

Philosophy is a fancy word, and it can cloak a lot of muddled thinking and maundering talk. But sooner or later we are going to have to face the fact that an arms race is hardly sufficient reason for man to dare the Cosmos. And sooner or later someone—perhaps you—are going to give us that “sufficient reason”: the purpose of man in space. (For a controversial view of the same general problem—along with an unexpected answer—see Dr. Arthur Barron's article, “Earthman, Keep Out!” on Page 69 of this issue.)—NL

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... OR SO YOU SAY

Dear Editor:

My reaction upon obtaining the October *Amazing* was unmixed. Essentially it was, "Oh boy, Bloch is back, at last a full length novel, his first in almost four years." I haven't read it yet but it definitely looks good. I just have one complaint. Glancing through "This Crowded Earth" I can tell it's probably straight s-f. Robert Bloch can also do chilling fantasy, as witness "Terror in Cut-Throat Cove" a few issues back in *Fantastic*. Why not see if you can get a full length fantasy novel from him. Do you have a policy in *Amazing* about only printing s-f novels, or will you occasionally publish fantasy material?

The Classics Corner sounds good, but it automatically presents a problem. The truly memorable stories in the old *Amazings* and *Fantastics* appeared as full length novels, and if you published them there wouldn't be room for the monthly novel, which incidentally I definitely favor. I doubt if there were any really outstanding short stories, though I know of a few that were good. Take Don Wilcox for instance, he was writing book length novels left and right for Ziff-Davis and they represented the peak of his career. He did write one outstanding, superlative novelette, "The Voyage That Lasted 600 Years" which would fit into *Amazing* even with a novel. But the rest of the material would be too long to include without dispensing with the novel.

Michael Deckinger
85 Locust Avenue
Millburn, N. J.

● We have a number of additional stories Bloch-ed out. Frinstance, a brand new novelette in a forthcoming issue of *Fantastic*. Keep close watch on your newsstand for it.

Dear Editor:

I am an avid reader of science fiction, although most people don't understand what I see in it; also many people don't consider it quite right for me to read it, because as a teacher I should know better. Still, there it is. I like the fantasy part of s-f better than the science part, because many space stories remind me too much of wild west stories, the horses being changed into spaceships and the guns becoming ray guns and the villains having three eyes and tentacles instead of a black mask. I prefer things that happen to ordinary

(Continued on page 75)

DEADLY SATELLITE

By HENRY SLESAR

ILLUSTRATOR FINLAY

The massive wheel hung in space—and in its bowels all the future lay.



DINAH WHITE, the loveliest secretary in the firm of Colman and Case, Space Engineers, wasn't easily ruffled. But when she entered the office of Merle Case, the high color of her cheeks and her general air of consternation made it plain that her announcement would be out of the ordinary.

"What's with you?" her boss said.

"A—a visitor for you."

"Oh? What's so unusual about that?"

"He's *Hraaki*."

Even Merle had to admit that her confusion was warranted. The *Hraaki*, the strange, intelligent race which inhabited the on-

There was no use trying to



explain how it happened. Merle had to get away quick.

ly hospitable planet in the Hellas star system, were not often seen in the business offices or thoroughfares of Earth. They kept to themselves, permitting only infrequent diplomatic and trading missions from the Earth government and industrial agencies. Despite their abilities in electronics, they were primitives in the matter of space travel, and all their vessels were outmoded Earth-ships, taken in barter for the ingenious products of their own electronic laboratories.

"Is this a joke?" Merle frowned, his heavy brows meeting on his rugged face. "What's a *Hraaki* want here?"

"I don't know. He says he has important business with you; he showed me a diplomatic pass, signed by someone at the White House. He must be somebody important."

"Well, show him in," Merle said. "Who knows? He may even become a client."

He turned out to be right.

"We would like to engage your firm," the *Hraaki* said, after Merle had courteously offered him a seat, and diligently avoided staring as he accepted it.

The *Hraaki* was of medium-height, for a *Hraaki*, which meant he was well over six feet. Except for the light-blue poreless skin, he appeared as human as any of Merle Case's clients. His face, as perfectly proportioned as a mannikin's, was exactly like the face of all *Hraaki*;

Merle wondered how they ever told each other apart.

"My name is Ka John," he said, showing white teeth in a pleasant smile.

"You want to engage *me*?" Merle said. Then he cleared his throat. "You'll pardon my surprise, Mr. John. You'll have to admit it's unusual—"

"Yes, unusual. But quite proper, I assure you. I have here a document—" he produced it from his Earth-style business suit—"which grants our world the right to an Earth-dollar credit not to exceed two billion dollars, for the purpose of constructing and placing in orbit a space satellite around the planet *Hraak*. This is a project we have dreamed of for many years on our world, Mr. Case; we trust you will be somewhat honored that your firm has been chosen to bring it into being."

Merle whistled softly to himself. The firm of Colman and Case had tackled some of the largest and most complex space problems that the Earth government or Earth industries could come up with, and their successes had been notable. But he never realized that his fame had spread into interstellar space.

Ka John brought him down a peg.

"Frankly," the *Hraaki* said, "I have never heard of your company. It was your own government which recommended you, along with several others, asking me to bid on the construction from them. However,

after certain inquiries, we decided your firm was of the highest calibre. Therefore, I am prepared to initiate an agreement immediately, if you accept the assignment." The *Hraaki* looked at the back of his blue hand. "Besides," he said casually, "your bid would have been lowest anyway."

"How do you know that?"

"Let's call it a guess," Ka John smiled.

Then Merle remembered.

"Wait a minute. This wouldn't be an example of the well-known *Hraaki* foresight, would it?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"I've heard stories—" Merle flushed. "I don't know how true. I've heard that the *Hraaki* have the ability to predict the future . . ."

The alien laughed. "And you believe that?"

"I didn't say I believed it. But when a story is as widespread as that—"

"Popular beliefs are the most fallacious, Mr. Case; surely you know that. Oh, I admit that there is a superstitious basis for these tales. When your Earth ships first discovered our planet, the men aboard them found it difficult to understand us. They concluded that we were part genius, part madmen, part savages. Our electronic abilities impressed them. Our ignorance of weapons and warfare astonished them. And our seeming ability to understand and sometimes predict behavior—" Ka John chuckled. "I believe that fright-

ened them. Hence the stories you've heard. But do you really give credit to such a myth, Mr. Case?"

"No," Merle said gruffly. "I guess I don't."

"Good." The *Hraaki* rubbed his hands briskly. "Then let us talk business. We're eager to begin work on the space station, Mr. Case, eager to catch up with your world in the field of space flight. Your government is equally anxious; our own advance will facilitate trade between us."

"Sounds like a worthwhile project," Merle said guardedly. "And a big one. I can't promise anything—"

"I'm sure we'll work it out," the *Hraaki* said. "I'm sure of it."

He smiled again, and opened the brief case on his lap.

Kelly Colman listened to his partner talk, his face empty of expression. Colman may not have been Merle's intellectual equal, but he was his physical opposite. Merle was big and brawny from an athletic youth; Colman was slim and dapper. Merle's hair was a rusty tangle; Colman's was a sleek and glossy wing. Colman was handsome; Merle had a rough-carved face that was serviceable.

"Quite a project," Colman said when Merle finished. "Take us a year, maybe two. Should be mighty profitable."

"It has to be finished in a year, that's what Ka John said. He wants a Braun-type construction: a wheel five hundred feet

across, rim section sixty feet in diameter. It won't be easy; the gravitational pull of *Hraak* is almost point forty greater than Earth's."

"We can do it," Colman grinned.

"I'll call a conference tomorrow, get all the basic astronomical data and surveys we need from Washington. We can't waste a minute."

Colman scratched his chin.

"You can spare me for a month, can't you?"

Merle looked up quickly. "A month? What for?"

Colman grinned. "I've got something coming up soon, and I thought of taking a little vacation. Of course, you can start the ball rolling without me."

"What's the idea?"

Merle's partner got up and walked to the window.

"I didn't want to tell you for a while; Dinah asked me not to. But considering the circumstances—" He turned to face him. "We're getting married, Merle, me and Dinah."

Merle responded with an expressive silence; so expressive of his surprise that he was afraid it revealed the truth of his feeling for Dinah to Kelly Colman. He had hired her himself, almost two years ago; for six months he had kept their relationship business-like. But it was hard to remain disinterested in Dinah; she was too vibrant and too lovely; your eyes had to engulf her when she was around.

He had dated her, but instead of revealing his interest, had become belligerent and tongue-tied, gruffer than necessary, often downright rude. When Colman, who knew his way around a woman, began to display open fondness for her, and began seeing her regularly, Merle had concealed his displeasure and secret jealousy. He never thought it would become serious; Colman played the man-woman game like a clever hand of cards. But now . . .

Colman broke into his thoughts.

"Look, I know this is a hell of a time to tell you. But you can see why I want some time off, can't you?"

"Yes," Merle said, gritting his teeth.

"You're the organizer in this outfit anyway," Colman said. "You get things started while I'm away, and I'll pitch right in when I get back. With, I might add, new enthusiasm."

"Cut it out!" Merle said sharply.

"Huh?"

"Nothing, nothing," Merle grumbled. "I'm just edgy, that's all. It's the biggest project we've had in five years."

"Well, I've still got a little time. I'll help you set up the meetings, stuff like that. I won't be deserting you, Merle."

"All right, all right," the engineer said, trying to hide the injury he had just sustained.

Dinah came into his office a few minutes later, and Merle dic-

tated a memorandum to all department heads. When she was leaving, she paused and said:

"These *Hraaki* . . ." She stopped, on the brink of a question she hesitated to ask. "Do you think it's true? That they can really predict the future?"

"Of course 'not. That's Sunday paper mythology."

"That man who was here, that Mr. Ka John . . . he said something funny to me when he left."

"Funny?"

"Yes. He smiled at me, in that peculiar way they have, and said . . ."

"What was it?"

"Congratulations," Dinah said. "Now what do you suppose he meant by that?"

"I don't know," Merle Case answered, busying himself at his desk.

It was good to be busy, good to be concerned with the myriad details involved in launching a project of the magnitude of the *Hraak* satellite. There were conferences every day, and sometimes night, for the first month: meetings with the astronomical experts, to determine the celestial mechanics involved; meetings with the rocket experts, with the fuel men, with the contractors who would be building the parts which would be pieced together in outer space more than a thousand miles above the planet. There were meetings with government officials, too, concerning the complex financing of the costly space hook which

the world of *Hraak* desired so strongly.

It was Warren Chambers, of the Interstellar Economic Authority, who dealt most with Merle Case on the project. They had worked together before; they had become good friends.

They met at Merle's home at night, where they could combine business talk with personal exchanges. It was a memorable night in Merle's life, because that morning, he had kissed the bride of his partner, Kelly Colman, and seen their copter rise in the air, honeymoon-bound.

Chambers noted the gloom in his manner, and asked: "Something wrong, Merle?"

"No, nothing. Just the usual amount of business headaches; this *Hraak* job is a tough one."

"Everything's going smoothly, isn't it?" Chambers, a gray-haired, paternal-faced man looked solicitous.

"Oh, sure, everything's fine. The *Hraaki* know what they want, all right. The design of the Wheel is all set; they have their own ideas about its interior construction. They don't care much about living quarters, for instance; the Wheel won't hold more than half a dozen of the *Hraaki*, if that. But I guess it's their business."

"Yes," Chambers said. Now it was his turn to look glum.

"You don't seem too happy. Something about this deal you don't like?"

"To tell you the truth, yes. Something about any deal in-

volving the *Hraaki* I don't like. I'm not the only one."

"I don't understand. The government approved the credit—"

"Of course. We couldn't do anything else, without appearing openly hostile. But there's not much love lost between the *Hraaki* and Earth; I don't know if you were aware of that."

"No, I wasn't. They keep to themselves so much—"

"Exactly. And that's one of the things we don't like. Their need for secrecy, their slyness in our diplomatic contacts. There's antagonism there, for some reason."

"But why?" Merle said.

"We don't know. Perhaps they resent our progress in so many fields; they're so oddly backward in all the sciences except electronics. They produce wonderful small machinery, miniaturized stuff that has our engineers drooling. On the other hand, they seem like savages, with all their numbo-jumbo about predictions . . ."

"Tell me about that," Merle said casually. "I thought it was just an old wives' tale."

"Most of it is, really. The *Hraaki* don't have religion the way we know it. The closest thing to it is the *Akabala*, an order of what might be called high priests. The *Akabala* are consultants of the future; the *Hraaki* pay frequent visits to them to learn what will happen next. Supposedly, the *Akabala* know what's around every corner. Our own people went to see

them on the early exploratory voyages, out of curiosity. Naturally, plenty of the predictions came true—that always happens with these fortune-telling boys. They say enough things, some of them are bound to coincide with the facts. But that's how the story got started."

Chambers fell silent, sipping his drink. Merle watched him thoughtfully, and then said:

"Warren—you don't think there's any *danger* in the *Hraaki*?"

His guest didn't look up.

"Danger? What kind of a notion is that?"

"I don't know. You seem so bothered by them, I couldn't help wondering."

Warren laughed. "They're completely non-belligerent, if that's what you mean. They know nothing of war or weapons. They have ships, but outmoded ones we sold them ourselves. No, I wouldn't call them a danger."

"But if they had weapons, and good ships, and all the rest—would they have the *desire* to make trouble?"

"Those are a lot of ifs."

"Answer me just the same."

Warren Chambers looked at him.

"*Hraak* is a dying world," he said. "Its death isn't imminent, far from it. In terms of our lifespan, it will be five thousand generations before the *Hraaki* have to start worrying about their water or air or sunlight. If you wanted to stretch a point,

you could say, yes, they might have the desire. But the idea is ridiculous, Merle; don't brood on it." He grinned, and changed the subject to what he thought would be a lighter topic. "Say, I heard that Kelly got himself married today. And to that pretty secretary of yours—"

"Yes," Merle frowned.

"Well, that's a surprise. I never thought Kelly would be caught without a steel net. She must be quite a gal."

"She's okay," Merle said, "As a secretary anyway."

Chambers grinned. "As to her other qualifications—well, I guess Kelly knows by now."

Merle dropped his glass; it shattered on the stone floor of the hearth. He let the pieces lie there.

It was six months before Merle Case was able to visit the world which was employing him to build a space hook in its heavens.

Ka John suggested the visit, wanting his personal supervision of the Earth team which was readying the relay rockets. The rockets, loaded with stores and structural materials, would jet-tison their cargo into space in another two months, in preparation for the job of assembly in the zero-gravity workshop of the cosmos.

Merle was grateful for the trip. It took him away from the office routine, away from Kelly Colman, who had become a brooder and a luncheon drinker

since his marriage. He found the planet *Hraak* a very fascinating place, verdant and tropical, yet strangely chill and silent. It was a world which never knew the concept of "countries" or "cities," a sprawling one-neighborhood world, whose only divisions of population were the *Hraaki Sa*, the common people of the world, the *Hraaki Ka*, the scientists and rulers, and the *Akabala*, the mystic, priestlike *Hraaki* who lived alone and apart in their jungle houses, awaiting the visits of those who wished the veil of the future drawn aside.

It was the *Akabala* who interested Merle the most. On his first week on the planet, he asked his host about them.

Ka John smiled. "I expected you to inquire; we rarely have a visitor who doesn't. Yes, I will arrange a meeting."

Ka John kept his word. One evening, a blue-tinted young man came to his shelter at the spaceport, bearing word that Ka John awaited him. He accompanied the youth, who led him to an Earth Government copter of ancient vintage. The *Hraaki* pilot turned out to be as reckless as a turnpike madman back home, but he got Merle to his destination—a jungle settlement some eighty miles from the spaceport. Ka John was waiting for him, grinning broadly.

"We will go on foot the rest of the distance," the *Hraaki* told him. Then he doled out a handful of dull-gray *Hraaki* coins. "Take these, and hand them to the

Akabala when we enter. Say nothing at any time; the *Akabala* requires silence."

"Will he speak in English?"

"I have chosen one who can," Ka John answered, and preceded his guest into the forest. He led him for quite a distance.

They walked until they had covered a foot trail half a mile long. They came at last to a leafy grove, where a vine-tangled structure seemed to grow from the thick vegetation itself. Ka John ushered him through the doorway.

There was a figure crouched inside, legs folded beneath him like an Indian fakir. He held a pencil-thin stick in his hand, which radiated an eerie green light. From the little Merle could see, the *Akabala* was similar in appearance to all the *Hraaki*, except for the elaborate clothing he wore.

At a nudge from Ka John, he placed the coins in the extended hand of the seer; he pocketed them in the folds of his garment as casually as if he had been a storekeeper.

Then the *Akabala* spoke.

"Men of Earth," he said in a hoarse whisper. "Your fate stands close to my eyes. Listen and heed to what must be, and what might be on the dual roads of the future."

Merle looked at Ka John, his face perplexed. The *Hraaki* bowed and said:

"Oh, far-seeing *Akabala*, my friend comes to you in ignorance.

Explain your words to him, and forgive him the need."

The *Akabala* sighed deeply.

"There are two futures," he said. "One so fixed in the road of Time, that nothing can alter it. The other—a divided path which leads to good or evil, black or white, yes, or no. It is this road which must be trodden most carefully."

Merle was uneasy. The adventure, broached as a lark, now seemed like something else.

"Listen, then, to the immutable fate in store for you, man of Earth. You will be engaged in a vast undertaking, and it will be successful. But before your task is fully completed, you will suffer grievously because of a woman."

Merle's vision blurred for a moment.

"Because of this woman," the *Hraaki* said, "you will commit an act you believed yourself incapable of even contemplating. You will kill a man. You will take the life of your closest friend, a man you have known and respected for much of your lifetime . . ."

Merle almost spoke, but Ka John's touch warned him into silence.

"When you have slain this man, you will flee in fear. You will be sought by your own kind for punishment. But you will not be captured, unless . . ."

The *Akabala* paused.

"It is here the road divides," the seer said, his voice weary.

Merle waited; when the *Akabala* failed to continue, he

looked towards Ka John, who shrugged.

"I say no more," the prophet said at last. "Know only that the road divides here, man of Earth; the future then lies in your own hands. I say no more."

He shut his eyes, and the eerie glowing stick dimmed and died.

"Come," Ka John said, "the *Akabala* rests."

Still staring into the darkness where the light had been, Merle Case followed the *Hraaki* out of the jungle dwelling. Neither spoke of the prediction all the way back to the spaceport.

In another four months, the work was well ahead of schedule, the rocket relays already dumping their cargoes in space, the first bolts riveting the massive Wheel together. Merle stayed on until he was confident that the task would soon near completion; then he turned his thoughts homeward.

He arrived five weeks later, and found a surprise awaiting him in the offices of Colman and Case, Space Engineers. His partner, Kelly Colman, wasn't at his desk, and hadn't been for almost a month.

He called the Colman home, a palatial suburban residence which Colman had erected to please his new bride. A maid answered, and her answers weren't satisfying.

"I'm sorry," she said. "Mr. Colman's not well, and Mrs. Colman's not here—"

"Well, what's wrong with him? Is he sick? Has the doctor been there?"

"No, sir."

"Then what is it? I have to speak to him!"

"I'm sorry," the maid answered, in a flustered voice.

"All right," Merle said grimly. "Then tell Mr. Colman I'm coming over, whether he wants to see me or not."

He hung up, still hearing the maid's protest in the receiver. Then he took a taxicopter to Northern Westchester.

There was a heavy, leaden silence surrounding the Colman house when Merle stepped out of the copter and onto the lawn. He walked up the wide driveway to the front entrance, conscious that even the birds had grown quiet in deference to some mystery which shrouded the three-level structure. When he rang the doorbell, it was a full minute before the latch clicked, and the small, worried face appeared.

"Mr. Case?" the maid said. "Mr. Colman said he didn't want you to come—he said he's not feeling well—"

"Let me in."

"Please, Mr. Case!" The woman was tearful. "He *told* me not to let anyone in, Mr. Colman *told* me—"

"It's all right, I'll tell him the truth. I'll say I forced my way in." As if to make the statement valid, he pushed harder until the maid could do nothing but stand aside. Then he went past her into an elaborately furnished

main room. It looked cold and untouched.

His eyes went back to the maid, and saw her glance towards the stairway.

He went up the stairs.

There were four closed doors on the upper level, and he heard a muffled sound behind the first. He tried the knob, but found the door locked. He rapped on it, and said:

"Kelly? You in there?"

"Go 'way, Merle!"

He rattled the knob. "Let me in, Kelly. I have to see you."

"I said go away!"

There was a silence, and then the crashing of glass. Then he heard Colman grumbling on the other side of the door. Finally, the door was opened.

Merle had a hard time accepting what he saw. Kelly Colman looked like a man marooned on an island on luxury. His beard was weeks old and his hair was matted; his clothes looked slept in, and his eyes were red-rimmed and moist. He smelled of whiskey, good whiskey, and lots of it. But there was something even more disturbing about him: an air of despair and desperation.

"For the love of God!" Merle said passionately. "What's happened to you, Kelly?"

A laugh came out of the anguished face.

"You figure it out," Colman said thickly. "Come in and have a drink, and then figure it out. You're good at figuring, Merle. Right? Am I right?"

Merle closed the door.

"This is crazy! I've never seen you like this—"

"Marriage suits me," his partner said. "Holy matrimony, pal—"

"Where's Dinah? Does she have anything to do with this?"

Colman narrowed his eyes craftily. "You don't know, huh? You really don't know, do you?"

"I don't know anything. I returned from *Hraak* only yesterday."

"You like Dinah, don't you, Merle? Maybe in love with her?"

Merle flushed. "Talk sense, Kelly."

"Think I'm blind?" He laughed again, and dropped on the bed, rubbing his chest slowly. "Listen, pal, I'm not blind. I know you too long. Beautiful cool Dinah . . . everybody loves Dinah, Merle. Why not you?"

"Did you have a fight? Is that what happened?"

"Fight? Fight Dinah? Cool beautiful Dinah, with those big innocent eyes? You don't know her, pal, believe me. You loved her right? Wanted her?"

"Kelly, this has to stop—"

"Why didn't you ask, pal? That's all you had to do, ask. Dinah's yours if you ask. Everybody knows that. Everybody."

"Where is she?" Merle said harshly. "Where's Dinah?"

"Ask *him*. Ask them. Ask a dozen guys. You don't know, Merle, you just don't know . . ."

Colman sat up suddenly in bed, and for a moment, appeared reasonable. With calm deliberation,

he went to the night table and slid open a drawer. When he removed the pistol inside, Merle said:

"What's that for, Kelly?"

"Going to get rid of them, Merle. One at a time. Get rid of them once and for all."

"Put it down, Kelly. You don't know what you're doing."

"That's what you say. Going to get rid of 'em, one by one. Starting with you, Merle—"

"Kelly!"

There was a knock on the bedroom door.

"You love her, Merle?" Colman walked towards him, the gun poised.

"Mr. Colman!" the maid's voice said. "Mr. Colman, the police—there's been an accident—"

"*You love her?*" Colman shouted, and Merle jumped to relieve him of the gun. His hand closed over Colman's wrist, and twisted; they struggled for a moment, and then, in a moment of clarity that seemed minutes long, Merle knew what would inevitably follow. Yet he was helpless to stop it, helpless to prevent the *Hraaki* prediction from coming true. As if in a dream, he heard the muffled blast of the pistol, and watched the bleeding body of his partner slide to the carpet.

"Mr. Colman!" the maid's voice shrieked.

Merle found himself holding the gun. He dropped it into his pocket, and then looked towards the door. He might have panicked at the realization that his

passage was blocked, that behind the exit the police waited, brought to the Colman house by some unfortuitous accident—of what kind he didn't know. He didn't stop to think or worry over its nature, yet he was calm. He knew his escape, like the killing of Kelly Colman, was preordained. The *Hraaki* had said so, and now he believed that the *Hraaki* were never wrong . . .

He went to the window.

It was a twenty-five foot drop to the ground below. Even if he made it uninjured, he could never cross the lawn towards the main highway without police interference. Yet he was certain he would escape, certain that his salvation awaited somehow. But where?

They were hammering at the bedroom door now, and for a moment, he struggled with rising terror and indecision. He could stay and face them, of course; he could ignore the *Hraaki* prediction and try to convince them of the truth—try and make them believe that Colman's death was nothing more than a drink-inspired accident . . .

Yet he knew they would never believe him. Colman had said too much, and they had been overheard. They'd arrest him, convict him, and then—

Merle opened the window, and braced himself for the jump.

But he didn't jump. He heard the sound of an engine, the whirling of blades; the miracle he awaited was there. It wasn't purely providential, but he

didn't know that until later, until he was safely aboard the copter of Ka John, the *Hraaki*, heading for the *Hraaki* starship which would take him a billion miles away from his pursuers . . .

"Why did you rescue me?" Merle said bitterly, when the starship was in midvoyage. "Just to make your *Akabala* fairy tale come true?"

Ka John smiled. "No, Mr. Case; we had more practical reasons. Once we knew you were destined to kill your partner, we knew we had to save you from punishment, for our own purposes. The satellite is almost complete, but we wish your guidance until the final moment. We have rescued you for selfish reasons, Mr. Case."

"And then what? Throw me back to the lions?"

"That," Ka John said, "is still behind the veil. But I will tell you this much. The police of Earth will be hunting you now. The woman servant will have made a statement concerning the episode that will place the blame for your partner's death squarely on you. She will say that you were one of Mrs. Colman's suitors, and that you came to ask Colman to release her. Mrs. Colman won't deny it—"

"Why not?"

"Because she is dead," Ka John said. "Dead in the crushed fuselage of a copter, beside the body of a young man who loved her, too. You have no witnesses

to speak for you, Mr. Case. But as to the outcome—" He shrugged. "It is here the road divides, Mr. Case, as the *Akabala* said."

"Then you admit that the *Hraaki* can predict the future?"

"Of course. But we can see only so far, and no further. Then the veil is thick . . ."

Merle stared at him, incredulously.

"But how? How is it possible?"

The *Hraaki* merely smiled.

An anger rose in Merle Case's breast like a flame. He drew the gun from his pocket.

"I'm sick of this game," he said, his voice quavering. "I want to know the truth, Ka John. How did you know I would kill Colman? How did you predict the time and the place?"

The pale blue skin went paler. "Put that gun away, Mr. Case. It won't do you any good—"

"You didn't expect this, did you, Ka John? You're surprised. Your *Akabala* didn't tell you I would threaten your life—perhaps take it—"

"The secrets of the *Akabala* are ancient, mysterious—"

"I don't believe you!" Merle said savagely, jamming the cold muzzle against the *Hraaki's* side. "I don't believe in mumbo-jumbo, Ka John. I've nothing to lose now; they want me for murder as it is. I swear to you by any gods you name—I'll kill you unless you talk!"

"No!" The *Hraaki* cried, his face no longer composed. "I cannot die. I have a destiny—"

"The road's dividing, Ka John."

He began to squeeze the trigger.

"Stop!" the *Hraaki* screamed. "I will tell you—I will tell you—"

"Then tell me, Fast!"

The *Hraaki's* eyes glazed.

"It is the machine," he said.

"What machine?"

"The Time Computer. The machine the *Hraaki Ka* have worked on for almost three thousand years . . ."

"What kind of machine? What does it do?"

"It computes the probabilities of events, enables us to see into the immediate future. There—there are no *Akabala*. It is a myth, a tale we created to keep the Time Computer a secret from the men of Earth. We wished you to believe that we possessed some magic, some mystic power in our minds, so that you would never know how truly advanced we were—"

"Why Ka John? Why keep it a secret?"

The *Hraaki's* eyes showed hatred. "You think of us as savages. You sneer at our beliefs, our way of life. You treat us as irresponsible children, a primitive burden for your race. You give us your outmoded flying toys, in exchange for our electronic wisdom, and think you have made a great bargain. You laugh at us, and think us fools, and mock at our blind ignorance of warfare and the uses of violence. But you think wrong, man

of Earth. We have a greater power than all your bombs and ships—and soon, that power will be so great that it will envelope your world as a fist closes upon a flea . . ."

"What power? What do you mean?"

"The power to *know*. To foresee every immediate action your world takes when the *Hraaki* declare war against you. A Time Computer so much greater than the puny instruments now at our command, that your every action will be foretold, and countered." He laughed. "Yes, man of Earth. The road divides. And soon, your world will have no more future. Tomorrow will belong to the *Hraaki* alone. It is so written—not in the stars, but in the Machine!"

Merle Case couldn't answer, not until he completed the thought that had entered his mind.

"The satellite . . ."

Ka John chuckled.

"It's not intended for space travel, is it?" Merle shook with the impact of his discovery. "It's nothing more than a housing for this crazy machine of yours. You're putting it in space, where we won't suspect its operation—"

"Of course. A machine the complexity and size of the Time Computer would arouse suspicion on our primitive jungle planet. Your people would investigate, ask questions. They would become alarmed . . ." He snarled suddenly. "Do you think we could not have built the space

station ourselves? But we had to remain ignorant savages in your eyes; that's why you were hired. But soon your world will learn what we really are . . . and what the satellite can do . . ."

Merle Case fired the gun in his hand.

The starship's pilot came out of the cabin as the *Hraaki* fell. Merle whipped the gun towards him, and said:

"Back to your controls, pilot. And turn this ship back to Earth."

In another month, a fleet of fighter-starships from the Earth base on Andromeda were on their way to the Hellas system. The terrified *Hraakis* predicted their arrival, but their foreknowledge did no good. The ships bombarded the newly-completed satellite with high-power shells, until it spun out of its orbit, and fell in flames to the jungle below.

Strangely enough, the Earth action caused no protest from the *Hraaki Ka*. Nothing was said: no words of bitterness, or anger, or recrimination. Relations between the two worlds remained strained, but normal. The

Hraaki, fatalists to the end, accepted their altered destiny without complaint, even without rancor.

There was an *Hraaki* in the courtroom on the first day of Merle Case's murder trial. He watched the proceedings with bland interest throughout the long hours of testimony. When the court was adjourned, he managed to reach the defendant through the crowd, and say:

"Mr. Case—could I speak to you?"

The bailiff and Merle's attorney tried to prevent it, but Merle said: "Wait. I want to hear him out."

"Thank you," the *Hraaki* smiled. "Thank you, sir. I merely wished to inform you of something."

"Yes? Of what?"

"Of the jury's verdict," the *Hraaki* said. "I thought you would wish to know."

"All right," Merle said. "What will it be?"

"You will be acquitted," the *Hraaki* said. "That is what the future holds. Good-bye, sir."

He bowed and left.

As usual, the *Hraaki* were right.

THE END



Call Us Prospectors

By IRV FANG

*Sometimes when you start a simple little rumor
you never know when you'll hear the end of it...*

OF ALL the dull jobs in the world of space travel, Colin and I probably had the dullest.

You would think that with all the explorer rockets whirring through ether where no man had ever traveled and with all the sumptuous spaceliners ferrying passengers I could latch onto some better job than carrying supplies to whistle-stop planets in the dog star's orbit.

Colin is a good pilot, too, inclined to grumble a little but then who wouldn't with a run like ours. He got caught by the solar police carrying black market whiskey to Jupiter and lost his first class license. As for me, that's another story. I became a bit too entangled with a luscious blonde who turned out to be the daughter of some big-wig on Earth. The old man found out about it, and came after me with

an electron gun, so I hightailed it out of the constellation and took this job with a beat-up cargo line stopping off at pioneer settlements on some of the thousands of planets that make up the dog star system.

We talked a lot, Colin and me, about getting a lucky break some day to escape this rut, but we didn't expect anything to come of it until we discovered that the planet Shir was almost solid uranium.

At least there was an awful lot of it there according to the geiger counter. How come the fifty-seven families that settled on Shir didn't know about it is a mystery we'll never figure out. They were only there for farming, so maybe they didn't even bother with Geiger counters, until our cargo trip.

Anyhow, we had just reached Shir's gravity field and were turning on the power to slow down when Colin asked what that noise was.

"What noise?" I asked back. When you turn the power on before a landing there is so much noise all round I didn't know which particular one he was referring to.

"That click, click, clicking," he said.

Colin and I have both sworn off the habit of cutting rocket fuel with pineapple juice so I figured he wasn't just hearing things. I listened. Sure enough, above the pocketa kapocketa there was a click, clickety, click.

"It sounds like it's coming from the cargo hold," I said.

"Number Two rocket is just below the front cargo hold," Colin said.

"Just what I was thinking," I replied. "Let's pull her back out of the gravity field for a check." I wasn't going to take any chances on ending up like a cigar ash on some dinky planet just to try and deliver some plant fertilizer.

Colin switched on the anti-gravity lever and I swung the nose around. Ten minutes later we were once again floating in the ether.

"That's funny," Colin said. "I can't hear it now."

We activated the magnets in our shoes and went clomping back along the metal sidewalls of the ship to the cargo hold.

"Still can't hear a thing,"

Colin said, pressing his ear to the plate above Number Two rocket.

I was standing higher than he was and I heard something, very faint, going, "click, click, click." I wandered back among the polythene crates with my ears stuck out until I came to one from which the noise apparently came. I called Colin over.

"It's in here," I said.

Colin came over to listen. "Shall we?" he asked.

"It's against the rules," I reminded him.

"To heck with the rules. It could be a bomb. I repeat, shall we?"

"Okay," I agreed. "Let's crack it open."

He produced a knife and slit the case open to expose a miscellaneous collection of compasses, pickaxes, a carton marked "DANGER; Blasting Caps" and a textbook on minerology.

"Looks like someone wants to go into the prospecting business," I said.

Colin reached into the case and pulled out a box marked, "Geiger Counter." "This is doing the tapping," he said beaming with success.

Sure enough the little black box was clicking merrily away and the pointer was wavering on the dial. It was a persistent clicking but it wasn't very loud, not surprising since we were a hundred miles from nowhere, nowhere meaning Shir.

"Well, it must have been

louder than this when we were closer to Shir," I said.

Colin's mind and mine must have gotten the same idea at the same time. We clomp, clomped back to the controls with unseemly haste, taking the Geiger counter, and headed back toward Shir.

The nearer we came the louder that black box clicked until, when we were just a few miles over land it sounded like everyone in the universe was clearing his throat at the same time.

"This planet," I said, "must be solid uranium or plutonium or something."

"We are about to become rich," Colin said. "Rich, rich, rich."

I folded my hands behind my head, leaned back and thought of the joys of a villa on the Venus Lido populated by beautiful gray-eyed Venusian serving girls. Then a more crass note interjected itself.

"Colin, old man, we own nary a patch of this floating atomic pile below. The whole planet belongs to a handful of farmers to whom we must deliver not only fertilizer but this Geiger counter."

"Let's cruise for a minute and think," he said.

I cut the rockets to idle and turned on the robot. We hung over Shir.

"Let's approach this logically," Colin said. "We have several facts before us. Fact number one is that people who own

uranium land are well rewarded."

"Check."

"Fact number two is that the whole planet below seems to contain uranium."

"Check."

"Fact number three is that the settlers don't know fact number two, otherwise it would have been in the telenews and would have been declared a Security area."

"Check."

"It would have been especially off-limits to gents like us. Of that you can be sure."

"An unpleasant fact, but check."

"Fact number four is that we are therefore the only people in the world who know about this fortune."

"Check."

"The conclusion is that if we manage to secure the uranium land and don't deliver the Geiger counter, we may happily look forward to a carefree future."

"How are we going to hide something that sounds like a New Year's Eve noisemaker?" I asked.

"Simple," Colin said. "We'll just take it apart."

"Okay," I agreed. "Now with what are we going to purchase a plot of land. We are flatter than Pluto's moon."

Colin put his feet on the dash panel and smiled a slow smile, exposing a gold-filled cavity.

"We are not going to buy a plot of land," he said. "We are

going to buy this whole crater-pocked planet."

"What!"

"Look here," he said. "We have a perfectly good if rickety spaceship which will, with a little crowding, take fifty-seven families and their essential luggage back to Earth or Mars. We can buy them out for the price of their passage if we can convince them they had better leave in a hurry."

"How are we going to do that?" I asked.

"Leave it to me," Colin said. "Now let's land this heap."

With the Geiger counter in fifty small pieces in a paper bag tucked behind the dashboard and the rest of the gear in the carton stowed in other dark recesses we made a smooth landing on Shir's rocket port. The whole community was there to greet us. All of the yokels wanted to be in on the semi-annual visit, the only excitement there was. They were so far out they didn't even have television.

A sunburned, broad-shouldered type came forward to greet us as we stepped out.

"We are happy to see you," he said, crushing my fingers with a big horny hand. "Did you have a good journey?"

"Fine," I said, extricating my mangled hand.

"We'd like you to have supper and spend the night in my home before you return," he said. "My name is Camp."

Colin broke away from a

group of men, women and kids crowding around him to shake hands.

"Are you the boss around here, Mr. Camp?" he asked.

"Well, in a way. I'm the community leader."

Colin didn't waste any time getting his scheme in motion.

"My co-pilot and I are very sorry that we have to bring bad news to your colony."

A murmur of surprise ran through the crowd. Camp frowned.

"What is the news?" he asked. I was curious myself.

"The Ministry of Fission has decided to use part of Shir as a dumping ground for waste atomic slag. They have been running out of dumping areas in the solar system and are going to use the planets in the dog star system," Colin said, managing to look very solemn.

"They can't do that," Camp said. "We've planted our fields here and built houses."

"That's not right," someone else said.

Colin spread his hands hopelessly. "Right or not, we can't question a decision of the Ministry of Fission. I guess they figured that since this was a new colony, you wouldn't have had time to get too settled. Anyhow, you aren't forced to leave. They would use the other side of the planet as a dump site."

Camp folded his big hands behind him. "No, we couldn't stay on the same planet with radioactive waste. In time it would

kill our livestock and plants, and maybe even us."

"We have no orders to transport you back," Colin continued. "But we would be willing to sell you passage if you wanted to return."

"You come upon us with such unexpected news," Camp said, mopping his brow with the back of his brown hand. "I . . . I . . . don't know what to tell you. We need time to think. The elders will have to meet . . . it's all so sudden."

He turned to the others. "Come to my house at the time the third moon rises." Then he said to us, "Meanwhile, you will be guests in my home. There are some points I want to clarify."

That did it, I said to myself. He's suspicious. Colin's story sounded so good he even had me believing it, though I couldn't help wondering how he and I would fit in. Now I figured this Camp character had a bee in his space bonnet. I was wrong though.

We piled into his terra-scooter after he gave his men orders to unload the fertilizer. At first he wasn't sure whether it was worth bothering to unload, but Colin explained that if they decided to stay they would need the fertilizer and if they decided to go back they would need the room.

Camp's house was one of those backwoodsdy little inflatable plastic jobs set in a clearing with a

lot of other houses that were identical except for color. There was a small vegetable garden around each one.

Camp's wife was friendly enough, but kind of dowdy looking and she had a grip that was almost as strong as his. They had a couple of nice kids though, and Camp shooed them away to the store for some cake and ice cream.

He didn't talk much until after supper, which was sort of plain, but I could tell he was thinking hard. Colin looked over toward me once at the supper table and winked. It was all I could do not to giggle.

After supper we took some chairs and sat outside. I must say that Shir's air was about as clear and refreshing as any I've ever sniffed. They told me it was due to the high oxygen content. They also told me the land was poor for planting and there were a lot of rocks. Boy, if those poor saps knew the rocks were probably solid uranium!

Like I said, Camp wasn't the least bit suspicious about the truth of what we were telling him. These colonist farmer types are pretty simple specimens when you get right down to it. They don't try to put one over on the next fellow and figure it will be vice versa. Camp never ran into anyone like us before.

Colin and I lit up some cigars and Camp lit up a pipe and asked, "When was the decision made?"

Colin answered, "I'm not exactly sure, Mr. Camp. Most likely sometime after the last spaceship left for Shir, because they instructed us to deliver the message."

"Was there any provision for compensating us for our work here if we should decide to leave?"

Colin fished in his pockets. "I had the instructions around here some place. I guess I must have left them back in the ship. I remember though. They agreed to pay you after you put in a claim with the Ministry of Colonies. There is some red tape involved, but I'm sure you won't have any trouble collecting."

Camp stared out over the land. "It seems such a shame after all our efforts here that we should be forced to leave. You know, the crops will be up in another month and we planned on having our first harvest festival."

I broke in. "Mr. Camp," I said, "you aren't being forced to leave. The choice is up to you."

Camp blew out some smoke. "No, we will have to leave," he said. "I'm sure the elders will accept that as the only choice they could make. But . . . but wasn't there some other place they could have chosen? The skies are full of uninhabitable moons."

Colin had a ready answer for that one. "The Ministry decided against using any more moons because the radiation would eventually seep back to the

planets that have been colonized for a long time. After all, it is better to forfeit two years of work here than a couple of centuries elsewhere."

"Yes, I suppose you are right. But another question arises. How are we to pay our passage back? Did the Ministry arrange to guarantee our passage?"

Colin managed to look very glum. "I'm afraid not."

"That makes matters very difficult. Most of our funds have gone into equipment. We don't have enough cash for return trips for all of us."

Colin threw his pitch. "Mr. Camp, I know I'm not supposed to do this and my co-pilot and myself could lose our jobs if our employers ever found out, but we have a little money of our own we have saved up. I guess it would just about cover all your fares. Suppose we paid everyone's fare back in return for the plows and other equipment you have to leave behind."

"That's very generous of you," Camp said. "I'll take it up with the elders. But you will be losing if you do this. Our second-hand goods will only fetch a fraction of the total fare price."

"Well, you are good people and we have no objection at all to extending ourselves to help a little."

"None at all," I echoed.

"Oh, by the way," Colin said, "you had better sign over the planet charter to us. That is, if you decide to leave. It's just a

little legal protection so we can come back for the supplies without anyone thinking we are stealing."

Camp nodded his head. "Yes, of course. We would have no more use for it . . . I cannot understand a government department doing this."

"It is unfortunate," my partner agreed. "But you know all the red tape and bungling that goes on in the government. One department never knows what another one is doing. If the Ministry of Agriculture or the Ministry of Colonies had been brought in on the decision, which I personally doubt, they might have kicked up a bit of a fuss. Of course the Ministry of Fission has more authority than the other two and I guess what's done is done." He spread his hands in gesture of hopelessness.

Camp looked toward the east and saw the third moon rising, slightly larger than the other two.

"The elders will meet soon," he said. "Would you like to remain?"

Colin rose and stretched. "No, I don't think so, thank you, Mr. Camp. We'll stroll through the fields for a while. It's a real shame that all this will soon be covered with radioactive dust."

A few men began arriving from out of the dusk and Colin and I took our leave and walked toward the fields. The ground was springy beneath our feet. Shir, being smaller than Earth, allowed us to leap about eight

feet in the air if we tried hard. As soon as we were out of sight and hearing range I jumped, I'll bet, twice as high.

"Boy, oh, boy! We did it."

"Yes," he grinned. "I think it is in the bag."

That was where it was, we learned the next day. The colonists had agreed to leave, bag and a limited amount of baggage.

For about five days life was pretty hectic on Shir. There wasn't anything for Colin or me to do but stand around and watch everybody pack, except for the night I sneaked on the ship and got the Geiger counter pieces, then hid them in a clump of bushes where nobody was likely to stray. I thought about putting the thing together, but then remembered it would probably make so much noise that our little business enterprise would be found out, and I sure didn't want that.

The women colonists couldn't make up their minds what to take and what to leave. To tell the truth there was one blonde who could have left herself on the planet and I wouldn't have minded one bit. I was going to suggest it to her, but Colin said no, there was no use looking for trouble when everything was going so smoothly, and besides I'd been in enough hot water over blondes already, he said, reminding me of that big-wig's daughter episode that made me leave Earth in the first place.

Some of the men didn't want to abandon the crops they had planted, but Camp and the rest of the elders talked to them. A couple of kids cried about wanting to stay where they were. A good spanking settled them and they soon got eager about the trip back, pestering me about how fast the ship would take off and what was the cruising speed in space, and things like that.

Just about the time we were ready to go the elders turned over the title to Shir to us. That settled that.

The trip back to Earth was pretty uneventful. I tried to make time with that blonde, but her husband was sitting next to her most of the time, and besides she didn't seem too interested. Camp kept talking about how he was going to complain to the central government about using a colonized planet as a dumping ground.

That was the reason Colin decided to land the ship at an out-of-the-way field in South America. He chose a backwash town in Uruguay. Everybody piled out and unloaded. When they saw where we were a couple of the elders complained to Colin. He told them something about fog closing in the big airports. They grumbled but there wasn't much they could do about it. We checked the rocket field schedule and learned there would be a ship by in a couple of days. That was enough time for us.

As soon as we unloaded them and their gear, we roared off

with the charter to Shir tucked away in Colin's pocket.

We landed in Chicago, where we took every cent out of our accounts, borrowed some from the few friends we could find who would lend it to us, and spent a hectic twenty-four hours buying mining equipment and books on mining law and property ownership regulations. So far, legally, we hadn't done anything wrong. There is no law against repeating a rumor.

Later, broke but happy, we refueled and headed back to Shir.

I never regretted having such a slow rocket ship as much as I did on the way back. The time it took to make the trip was long enough for one of the modern spaceliners to make three round trips.

Colin hit the old nail on the head on the journey when he added things up.

"It will take us just one month to establish our claim, get one of the big mining companies interested, and see about government approval. Just one month and we'll have enough money to loll around Venus or Earth for the rest of our lives. Now isn't that worth one month."

I said it sure was. And it would have been if things had worked out a little differently, like not finding that probe rocket from Earth with Ministry of Fission insignia on its side.

It had arrived in Shir about

a day before we did, which means it probably left Earth two to three weeks after us, considering the speed of these little government jobs.

We saw the ship as we descended. Colin landed us beside it. We figured maybe the government had gotten on to the uranium here somehow and were going to claim it freehold. Colin took the charter from his pocket and held it firmly as we strode over to the probe ship.

"What are you guys doing here?" Colin asked their captain.

"What are you doing here?" the captain wanted to know.

"We own this planet," I said.

"Oh, you're the colonists." He turned to a lieutenant next to him. "Leave it to the colonel to get things all balled up. The way he told it to me the Ministry of Colonies already brought all the colonists home."

He turned back to us. "Look, I'm very sorry but we didn't realize anyone was still here. All your friends are on Earth and they have been reimbursed for having to leave their homes and land. Paid quite well, too, and the government has thrown in a free charter and transportation

to a new planet besides. I don't know how you fellows were overlooked."

"Well," Colin said, "we . . . we were away getting some supplies."

"Mmm, too bad," the captain said with an air of brisk efficiency. "I'm afraid you'll have to turn around and head back to Earth. But don't worry. You will be paid for it and the compensation will be adequate."

"Paid?" I asked.

The captain smiled cheerfully. "Yes, you know, the usual thing, compensation based on the length of stay here, the amount of building you've done and crops you've planted."

"But what is this all about?" I asked.

"I guess you don't know yet," he said. "It's all confusion as usual in the Fission Ministry. Never tell anyone anything. I have a hunch the colonel didn't even know himself about this place being turned into a new nuclear slag dump until he heard about it from the Ministry of Colonies."

He looked around. "It seems a shame to pick this planet. It looks like the sort of spot someone could do something with."

THE END



ARE YOU LISTENING?

By HARLAN ELLISON

ILLUSTRATOR KEITH

*First they make you conform,
then you want to conform,
finally you have to conform
—and the next thing you
know you're so much a part
of the pattern nobody sees
you any more. You know
what I mean . . . ?*

THERE are several ways I wanted to start telling this: First, I was going to begin it:

I began to lose my existence on a Tuesday morning. But then I thought about it and:

This is my horror story. seemed like a better way to begin. But after thinking it over (I've had a devil of a lot of time to think it over, you can believe me), I realized both of those were pretty melodramatic, and if I wanted to instill trust and faith and all that from the outset, I had just better begin the way it happened, and tell it through to now, and then make my offer, and well, let you decide for yourself.

Are you listening?

Perhaps it all began with my genes. Or my chromosomes. Whichever or whatever combination made me a Casper Milque-

toast prototype, that or those are to blame, I'm sure. I woke up a year ago on a Tuesday morning in March, and knew I was the same as I had been for hundreds of other mornings past. I was forty-seven years old, I was balding, my eyes were good—and the glasses I used only for reading. I slept in a separate room from my wife Alma, and I wore long underwear; chiefly because I've always picked up a chill quickly.

The only thing that might possibly be considered out-of-the-ordinary about me is that my name is Winsocki.

Albert Winsocki.

You know, like the song . . . "Buckle down Winsocki, you can win Winsocki if you'll only buckle down . . ." Very early in life I was teased about that, but my mild nature kept me from taking offense, and instead of growing



It gets so no one looks any more—except to look alike.

to loathe it, I adopted it as a sort of personal anthem. Whenever I find myself whistling something, it is usually that.

However—

I woke up that morning, and got dressed quickly. It was too cold to take a shower, so I just daubed water on my wrists and face, and dressed quickly. As I started down the stairs, Zasu, my wife's Persian, swept past between my legs. Zasu is a pretty stable cat, and I had never been quite snubbed before, though the animal *had* taken to ignoring me with great skill. But this morning of which I speak, she just swarmed past, and not even a meowrrl or a spit. It was unusual, but not remarkable.

But just an indication of what was to come.

I came into the living room, and saw that Alma had laid out my paper on the arm of the sofa, just as she had done for twenty-seven years. I picked it up in passing, and came into the dinette.

My orange juice was set out, and I could hear Alma in the kitchen beyond. She was muttering to herself as usual. That is one of my wife's unpleasant habits, I'm afraid. At heart she is a sweet, dear woman, but when she gets annoyed, she murmurs. Nothing obscene, for goodness sake, but just at the bare threshold of audibility, so that it niggles and naggles and bothers. She *knew* it bothered me, or perhaps she didn't, I'm not sure. I don't think Alma was aware that I

really *had* any likes or dislikes of any real strength.

At any rate, there she was, muttering and murmuring, so I just called out, "I'm down, dear. Good morning." Then I turned to the paper, and the juice.

The paper was full of the same sort of stuff, and what else could orange juice be but orange juice?

However, as the minutes passed, Alma's mutters did not pass away. In fact, they got louder, more angry, more annoyed. "Where is that man? He *knows* I despise waiting breakfast! Now look . . . the eggs are hard. Oh, where is he?"

This kept up for some time, though I repeatedly yelled in to her, "Alma, *please* stop, I'm here. I'm down, can't you understand?"

Finally, she came storming past, and went through into the living room. I could hear her at the foot of the stairs—hand on bannister, one foot up on the first step—yelling up to no one at all, "Albert! *Will* you come down? Are you in the bathroom again? Are you having trouble with your kidneys? Shall I come up?"

Well, that was too much, so I laid aside my napkin, and got up. I walked up behind her and said, just as politely as I could, "Alma. What is the matter with you, dear? I'm right here."

It made no impression.

She continued howling, and a few moments later stalked upstairs. I sat down on the steps,

because I was sure Alma had lost her mind, or her hearing had gone, or something. After twenty-seven happily married years, my wife was dreadfully ill.

I didn't know what to do. I was totally at a loss. I decided it would be best to call Dr. Hairshaw. So I went over and dialed him, and his phone rang three times, before he picked it up and said, "Hello?"

I always felt guilty calling him, no matter what time of the day it was—he had *such* an intimidating tone—but I felt even *more* self-conscious this time, because there was a decidedly muggy value to his voice. As though he had just gotten out of bed.

"Sorry to wake you at this hour, Doctor," I said quickly. "This is Albert Winso—"

He cut me off with, "Hello? Hello?"

I repeated, "Hello, Doctor? This is Al—"

"Hello there? Anyone there?"

I didn't know what to say. It was probably a bad connection, so I screamed as loud as I could, "Doctor, this is—"

"Oh, *hell!*" he yelled, and jammed down the receiver.

I stood there for a second with the handpiece gripped tightly, and I'm dreadfully afraid an expression of utter bewilderment came over my face. Had everyone gone deaf, today. I was about to re-dial, when Alma came down the stairs, talking out loud to herself.

"Now *where* on Earth can that man have gone? Don't tell me he

got up and went out without any breakfast? Oh well, that's less work for me today."

And she went right smack past me, staring right *through* me, and into the kitchen. I plonked down the receiver and started after her. This was *too* much! During the past few years Alma had lessened her attentions to me, even at times seemed to ignore me; I would speak and she would not hear, I would touch her and she would not respond. There had been increasingly more of these occasions, but this was too much!

I went into the kitchen and walked up behind her. She did not turn, just continued scouring the eggs out of the pan with steel wool. I screamed her name. She did not turn, did not even break the chain of humming.

I grabbed the pan from her hands and banged it as hard as I could on the stove-top (something remarkably violent for me, but I'm sure you can understand that this was a remarkable situation). She did not even start at the noise. She went over to the icebox and took out the cube trays. She began to defrost the box.

That was the last straw. I slammed the pan to the floor and stalked out of the room. I was on the verge of swearing, so mad was I. What kind of game *was* this? All right, so she didn't want to make my breakfast; so that was just one more little ignoring factor I had to put up with. All

right, so why didn't she just say so. But this folderol was too much!

I put on my hat and coat and left the house—slamming the door as hard as I could.

I glanced at my pocket-watch, and saw the time had long since passed for me to catch my bus to the office. I decided to take a taxi, though I wasn't quite sure my budget could afford the added strain. But it was a necessity, so I walked past the bus stop, and hailed a cab as it went past. Went past is correct. For it zipped by me without even slowing. I had seen it was empty, so why didn't the cabbie stop? Had he been going off duty? I supposed that was it, but after eight others had whizzed by, I was certain something was wrong.

But I could not discern what the trouble might be. I decided, since I saw it coming, to take the bus anyhow. A young girl in a tight skirt and funny little hat was now waiting at the stop, and I looked at her rather sheepishly, saying, "I just can't figure out these cabmen, can you?"

She ignored me. I mean, she didn't turn away as she would to some masher, nor did she give me a cursory glance and not reply. I mean, she didn't know I was there.

I didn't have any more time to think about it, because the bus stopped, and the girl got on. I started up the steps, and barely made it, for the bus driver slammed the doors with a wheeze, catching the tail of my coat.

"Hey! I'm caught!" I yelled, but he paid no attention. He watched the girl walk swayingly to her seat, in his rear view mirror, and started to whistle. The bus was crowded, and I didn't want to make a fool of myself, so I reached out and pulled his pants leg. Still, he didn't respond.

That was when the idea started to form.

I yanked my coattail loose, and so mad was I, I decided to make him *ask* for his fare. I walked back, expecting any moment to hear him say, "Hey, you. Mister. You forgot to pay your fare." Then I was going to respond, "I'll pay my fare, but I'll report you to your company, too!"

But even that tiny bit of satisfaction was denied me, because he continued to drive, and his head did not turn. I think that made me angrier than if he had insulted me; what the hell was going on? Oh, excuse me, but that was what I was thinking, and I hope you'll pardon the profanity, but I want to get this across just as it happened.

Are you listening?

Though I shoved between an apoplectic man in a Tyrolean hat and a gaggle of high school girls, when disembarking, though I nudged and elbowed and shoved them, just desperately *fighting* to be recognized, no one paid me the slightest heed. I even—I'm so ashamed now that I think of it—I slapped one of the girls on her, uh, her behind, so to speak. But she went right on talking

about some fellow who was far out of it, or something like that.

It was most frustrating, you can imagine.

The elevator operator in my building was asleep—well, not *quite*, but Wolfgang (that's his name, and he's not even German, isn't that annoying?) always *looked* as though he were sleeping—in his cage. I prodded him, and capered about him, and as a final resort cuffed him on the ear but he continued to lie there against the wall, with his eyes shut, perched on his little pull-down seat. Finally, in annoyance, I took the elevator up myself, after booting him out onto the lobby tiles. By then I had realized, of course, that whatever strange malady had befallen me, I was to all intents and purposes, invisible. It seemed impossible that even if I were invisible, that people should not notice their backsides being slapped, or their bodies being kicked onto the tiles, or their elevators stolen, but apparently such was the case.

I was so confused by then—but oddly enough, not in the slightest terrified—I was half belligerent, and half pixified with my own limitless abilities. Visions of movie stars and great wealth danced before my eyes.

And disappeared as rapidly.

For what good were women or wealth if there was no one to share it with you. Even the women. So the thoughts of being the greatest bank robber in history passed from me, and I resigned myself to getting out—if out was

the proper term—getting out of this predicament.

I left the elevator on the twenty-sixth floor, and walked down the hall to the office door. It read the same as it had read for twenty-seven years:

Rames & Klaus Diamond Appraisers Jewelry Experts

I shoved open the door, and for a second my heart leaped in my throat that perhaps till now it had all been a colossal hoax. For Fritz Klaus—big, red-faced Fritz with the small mole beside his mouth—was screaming at me.

"Winsocki! You dolt! How many times have I told you when they go back in the pinch-bags, pull tight the cords! A hundred thousand dollars on the floor for the scrubwoman! Winsocki! You imbecile!"

But he was not screaming at me. He was screaming, that was all. But really, it was no surprise. Klaus and George Rames never actually talked to me . . . or even bothered to shout at me. They knew I did my job—had, in fact, been doing it for twenty-seven years—with method and attentiveness, and so they took me for granted. The shouting was all part of the office.

Klaus just had to scream. But he was directing his screams at the air, not at me. After all, how *could* he be screaming at me? I wasn't even there.

He went down on his knees,

and began picking up the little uncut rough diamonds he had spilled, and when he had them all, he went down further on his stomach, so his vest was dirtied by the floor, and looked under my bench.

When he was satisfied, he got up and brushed himself off . . . and walked away. As far as he knew, I was working. Or in his view of the world, was I just eliminated? It was a puzzler, but no matter . . . I was not there. I was gone.

I turned around and went back down the hall.

The elevator was gone.

I had to wait a long time till I could get to the lobby.

No cars would stop for my ring.

I had to wait till someone else on that floor wanted down.

That was when the real horror of it all hit me.

How strange . . .

I had been quiet all my life; I had married quietly and lived quietly and now, I had not even the one single pleasure of dying with a bang. Even that had been taken from me. I had just sort of snuffed out like a candle. How or why or when was no matter. I had been robbed of that one noise I had thought was mine, inevitable as taxes. But even that had been deprived me. I was a shadow . . . a ghost in a real world. And for the first time in my life, all the bottled-up frustrations I had never known were banked inside me, burst forth. I was shock-

ed through and down with horror, but instead of crying, I did not cry.

I hit someone. I hit him as hard as I could. In the elevator there. I hit him full in the face, and I felt his nose skew over, and blood ran darkly on his face, and my knuckles hurt, and I hit him again, so my hand would slide in the blood, because I was Albert Winsocki and they had taken away my dying. They had made me quieter still. I had never bothered anyone, and I was hardly noticed, and when I would finally have had someone mourn for me, and notice me, and think about me as myself alone . . . I had been robbed!

I hit him a third time, and his nose broke.

He never noticed.

He left the elevator, covered with blood, and never even flinched.

Then I cried.

For a long time. The elevator kept going up and down with me in it, and no one heard my crying.

Finally, I got out and walked the streets till it was dark.

Two weeks can be a short time.

If you are in love. If you are wealthy and seek adventure. If you have no cares and only pleasures. If you are healthy, and the world is fine and live and beckoning. Two weeks can be a short time.

Two weeks.

Those next two weeks were the longest in my life. For they were

hell. Alone. Completely, agonizingly alone, in the midst of crowds. In the neoned heart of town I stood in the center of the street and shrieked at the passing throngs. I was nearly run down.

Two weeks of wandering, sleeping where I wanted to sleep—park benches, the honeymoon suite at the Waldorf, my own bed at home—and eating where I wanted to eat—I took what I wanted; it wasn't stealing, precisely; if I hadn't eaten, I would have starved—yet it was all emptiness.

I went home several times, but Alma was carrying on just nicely without me. Carrying on was the word. I would never have thought Alma could do it, particularly with the weight she had put on the past few years . . . but there he was.

George Rames. My boss. I corrected myself . . . my ex-boss.

So I felt no real duty to home and wife.

Alma had the house and she had Zasu. And, it appeared, she had George Rames. That fat oaf!

By the end of two weeks, I was a wreck. I was unshaved, and dirty, but who cared? Who could see me . . . or would have cared had they been able to!

My original belligerence had turned into a more concrete antagonism toward everyone. Unsuspecting people in the streets were pummeled by me as I passed, should the inclination strike me. I kicked women and slapped children . . . I was indifferent to

the moans and cries of those I struck. What was their pain compared to *my* pain—especially when none of them cried. It was all in my mind. I actually *craved* a scream or whine from one of them. For such an evidence of pain would have been a reminder that I was in their ken, that at least I existed.

But no such sound came.

Two weeks? Hell! Paradise Lost!

It was a little over two weeks from the day Zasu had snubbed me, and I had more or less made my home in the lobby of the St. Moritz-On-The-Park. I was lying there on a couch, with a hat I had borrowed from a passer-by over my eyes, when that animal urge to strike out overcame me. I swung my legs down, and shoved the hat back on my head. I saw a man in a trenchcoat leaning against the cigar counter, reading a newspaper and chuckling to himself. That cruddy dog, I thought, what the hell is *he* laughing about?

It so infuriated me, I got up and lunged at him. He saw me coming, and sidestepped. I, of course, expected him to go right on reading, even when I swung on him, and his movement took me by surprise. I went into the cigar case and it caught me in the stomach, knocking the wind from me.

"Ta-ta, buddy," the man in the trenchcoat chastised me, wagging a lean finger in my face, "now that isn't polite at all, is it?"

To hit a man who can't even see you."

He took me by the collar and the seat of my pants and threw me across the lobby. I went flailing through a rack of picture postcards, and landed on my stomach. I slid across the polished floor and brought up against the revolving door.

I didn't even feel the pain. I sat up, there on the floor, and looked at him. He stood there with his hands on his hips, laughing uproariously at me. I stared, and my mouth dropped open. I was speechless.

"Catching flies, buddy?" he gibed.

I was so amazed, I left my mouth open.

"Y-you, you can *see* me!" I caroled. "You can *see* me!"

He gave a rueful little snort, and turned away. "Of course I can." He started to walk away, then stopped and tossed over his shoulder, "You don't think I'm one of *them*, do you?" and crooked his thumb at the people rushing about in the lobby.

It had never dawned on me.

I had thought I was alone in this thing.

But here was another, like me!

Not for a second did I consider the possibility that he could see me where the others could not, and still be a part of their world. It was apparent from the moment he threw me across the lobby that he was in the same predicament *I* was. But somehow, he seemed more at ease

about it all. As though this was one great party, and he the host.

He started to walk away.

I scrambled to my feet as he was pressing the button for the elevator, wondering why he was doing that. The elevator couldn't stop for him if it was human-operated, as I'd seen it was.

"Uh, hey! Wait a minute there—"

The elevator came down, and an old man with baggy pants was running it. "I was on six, Mr. Jim. Heard it and come right down."

The old man smiled at the man in the trenchcoat—Jim it was—and Jim clapped him on the shoulder. "Thanks, Denny. I'd like to go up to my room."

I started after them, but Jim gave Denny a nudge, and inclined his head in my direction, with a disgusted expression on his face. "Up, Denny," he said.

The elevator doors started to close. I ran up.

"Hey! Wait a second. My name is Winsocki. Albert Winsocki, like in the song, *you* know, buckle down Win—"

The doors closed almost on my nose.

I was frantic. The only other person (*persons*, I realized with a start) who could see me, and they were going away . . . I might search and never find them.

I was *so* frantic, in fact, I almost missed the easiest way to trace them. I looked up and the floor indicator arrow was going up, up, up to stop at the tenth

floor. I waited till another elevator came down, with the ones who could not see me in it, and tossed out the operator . . . and took it up myself.

I had to search all through the corridors of the tenth floor till I heard his voice through a door, talking to the old man.

He was saying, "One of the newer ones, Denny. A boor, a completely obnoxious lower form of life."

And Denny replied, "Chee, Mr. Jim, I just like to sit an' hear ya talk. Wit all them college words. I was real unhappy till you come along, ya know?"

"Yes, Denny, I know." It was a condescending tone of voice if ever I'd heard one.

I knew he'd never open the door, so I went looking for the maid from that floor. She had her ring of keys in her apron, and never even noticed me taking them. I started back for the room, and stopped.

I thought a moment, and ran back to the elevator. I went downstairs, and climbed into the booth where the bills were paid, where all the cash was stored. I found what I was after in one of the till drawers. I shoved it into my coat pocket, and went back upstairs.

At the door I hesitated. Yes, I could still hear them babbling. I used the skeleton key to get inside.

When I threw open the door, the man named Jim leaped from the bed and glared at me. "What

are you doing in here? Get out at once, or I shall *throw* you out!"

He started toward me.

I pulled what I had gotten from the till drawer from my pocket, and pointed it at him. "Now just settle back, Mr. Jim, and there won't be any trouble."

He raised his hands very melodramatically, and started backward till his knee-backs caught the edge of the bed and he sat down with a plop.

"Oh, take down your hands," I said. "You look like a bad western movie." His hands came down self-consciously.

Denny looked at me. "What's he doin', Mr. Jim?"

"I don't know, Denny; I don't know," Jim said slowly, with thought. His eyes were trained on the barrel of the short-nosed revolver I held. His eyes were frightened.

I found myself shaking. I tried to hold the revolver steady, but it wavered in my hand as though I were inside the eye of a tornado. "I'm nervous, fellow," I said, partly to let him note it, as if he hadn't already, and half to reassure myself that I was master of the situation. "Don't make me any worse than I am right now."

He sat very still, his lowered hands folded in his lap.

"For two weeks now, I've been close to going insane. My wife couldn't see or hear or feel me. No one in the street could. No one for two weeks. It's like I'm dead . . . and today I found you two. You're the only ones like

me! Now I want to know what this is all about. What's happened to me?"

Denny looked at Mr. Jim, and then at me.

"Hey is he cuckoo, Mr. Jim? You want I should slug him, Mr. Jim?"

The old man could never have made it.

Jim saw that much, to his credit.

"No, Denny. Sit where you are. The man wants some information. I think it's only fair I give it to him." He looked at me. His face was soft, like a sponge.

"My name is Thompson, Mr.—ah—Mr. what-did-you-say-your-name-was . . .?"

"I didn't, but it's Winsocki. Albert Winsocki. Like in the song."

"Oh, yes, Mr. Winsocki. Well," his poise and sneering manner were returning as he saw he at least had the edge on me in information. "The reason for your current state of non-noticeability—you aren't really unsubstantial, you know. That gun could kill me . . . a truck could run us down and we'd be dead—is very complex. I'm afraid I can't give you any scientific explanations, and I'm not even sure there are any. Let's put it this way . . ."

He crossed his legs, and I steadied the gun on him. He went on. "There are forces in the world today, Mr. Winsocki, that are invisibly working to make us all carbon copies of one another. Forces that force us into molds

of each other. You walk down the street and never see anyone's face, really. You sit faceless in a movie, or hidden from sight in a dreary living room watching television. When you pay bills, or car fares or talk to people, they see the job they're doing, but never you.

"With some of us, this is carried even further. We are so unnoticeable about it—wallflowers, you might say—all through our lives, that when these forces that crush us into one mold work enough to get us where they want us, we just—poof!—disappear to all those around us. Do you understand?"

I stared at him.

I knew what he was talking about, of course. Who could fail to notice it in this great machined world we'd made for ourselves. So that was it. I had been made like everyone else, but had been so negative a personality before, it had completely blanked me out to everyone. It was like a filter on a camera. Put a red filter on and everything red was there—but not there. That was the way with me. The cameras in everyone had been filtered against me. And Mr. Jim, and Denny, and—

"Are there more like us?"

Mr. Jim spread his hands. "Why, there are dozens, Winsocki. Dozens. Soon there will be hundreds, and then thousands. With things going the way they are . . . with people buying in supermarkets and eating in drive-ins and this new subliminal

TV advertising . . . why, I'd say we could be expecting more company all the time.

"But not me."

I looked at him, and then at Denny. Denny was blank, so I looked back at Thompson. "What do you mean?"

"Mr. Winsocki," he explained patiently, but condescendingly, "I was a college professor. Nothing really brilliant, mind you, in fact I suppose I was dull to my students. But I knew my subject. Phoenician Art, it was. But my students came in and went out and never saw me. The faculty never had cause to reprimand me, and so after a while I started to fade out. Then I was gone, like you.

"I wandered around, as you must still be doing, but soon I realized what a fine life it was. No responsibility, no taxes, no struggling for existence. Just live the way I wish, and take what I want. I even have Denny here—he was a handyman no one paid attention to—as my friend and manservant. I like this life, Mr. Winsocki. That was why I was not too anxious to make your acquaintance. I dislike seeing the *status quo* upset."

I realized I was listening to a madman.

Mr. Jim Thompson had been a poor teacher, and had suffered my fate. But where I had been turned—as I now realized—from a Milquetoasted hum-drummer to a man cunning enough to find a revolver, and adventurous enough

to use it, he had been turned in to a monomaniac.

This was his kingdom.

But there were others.

Finally, I saw there was no point talking to him. The forces that had cupped us and crushed us till we were so small the rest of the world could not see us, had done their work all too well on him. He was lost. He was satisfied with being unseen, unheard, unknown.

So was Denny. They were complacent. More than that . . . they were overjoyed. And during this past year I have found many like them. All the same. But I am not like that. I want out of here. I want you to see me again.

I'm trying desperately, the only way I know how.

It may sound stupid, but when people are day-dreaming, or unfocused on life, so to speak, they may catch sight of me. I'm working on that. I keep whistling and humming. Have you ever heard me? The song is "Buckle Down Winsocki."

Have you ever caught sight of me, just out of the corner of your eye, and thought it was a trick of your imagination?

Have you ever thought you heard a radio or TV playing that song, and there was no radio or TV?

Please! I'm begging you! Listen for me. I'm right here, and I'm humming in your ear so you'll hear me and help me.

"Buckle Down Winsocki," that's the tune. Can you hear it?

Are you listening? **THE END**

*They made him play God...
but it was up to him to de-
cide if he would be a God
of Destruction, and hurl the
atomic thunderbolt...*

UNTO THE Nth GENERATION

By ROG PHILLIPS

ILLUSTRATOR SUMMERS



THE nurse came in, pushing the breakfast cart ahead of her. Her hair was blonde, her complexion flawless and fairly radiating the pinkness of good health. Her uniform, made of one of the inorganic plastics, was spotless white.

"Good morning, Greatgrandpa John," she said cheerfully. "How are you today." It was not a question. It was a ritual she had been carefully trained in.

"Eh?" John said. He watched her come toward the bed. "You're a new one," he said. His eyes took on a sly look. "Purty, too. What's your name?"

"Ada." She began transferring the dishes to the bed stand.

"Ada what?"

"Ada Blake." She smiled affectionately and unfolded the napkin to spread under his chin.

"Blake?" he echoed, frowning. "Say, maybe you aren't a great-granddaughter of mine ay tall. What was your mother's maiden name?"

"Ada White." The nurse dipped a spoon into the synthetic cereal and brought it towards John's mouth.

He pushed it away and scooted himself up to a sitting position. "I can feed myself," he said curtly.

Smiling, she relinquished the spoon.

"White?" he said. "Your

mother's name was White. That don't help. Blake and White." He chewed thoughtfully. "What were your grandmothers' maiden names?"

Ada's face dimpled in a smile. "Joan Winstead, and ——" She touched the tip of a finger to her chin and gazed ceilingward while John watched her with impatience. "And Shirl Daven—"

"Shirl Davenport!" John said. "That's the one. Daughter of mine." He looked at the nurse with a twinkle in his eyes. "So you're a greatgranddaughter of mine. Thought so. What did you say your name was again?"

"Ada. Ada Blake."

"Ada." John said the name as though sampling its flavor. Then he nodded his head in approval.

Ada waited. Every morning the ritual was exactly the same, down to the last intonation, the lengths of the individual pauses in conversation—even to the way Greatgrandpa John got cereal on his chin with the third spoonful.

"Guess all of your generation are greatgrandchildren of mine," John said absently.

"Yes, Greatgrandpa John," Ada said, softly, reverently.

Then she smiled, and her smile was a mask for her inner feelings. It took tremendous will power to keep to the ritual at this point, rather than follow her own natural impulses and drop to her knees in worship.

No words could ever describe the simple wonder of being in

Greatgrandpa John's presence, of seeing Him portray fresh surprise, curiosity, pride, and other mortal traits, always the same way, each day, in his simple lesson of living, just as though he were not the Captain . . .

"Yup," Greatgrandpa John said quietly. He looked thoughtful for a moment, then frowned at a recollection.

He was going to have to kill all of them. He mustn't forget that! Somehow, some way, he was going to have to kill them all, down to the last great great grandchild.

He had made up his mind about it last night.

The logic of it, the necessity of it, had hit him with numbing clarity, followed by a wave of anger toward the whole human race for not having seen something so obvious and so inevitable and taken steps to avoid it—avoid all *this*.

Some things are obvious to everyone. If you take a loaded gun and point it at someone and pull the trigger you will kill or wound him. If you are a good shot and you take careful aim the outcome is certain.

In the same way, with the same inevitability, a lot of human situations that can happen out among the stars are just as predictably fatal. And what *can* happen *will* happen sooner or later, unless steps are taken to avoid it.

It would have been so simple for the human race to have thought of that before going out

into space, for it to have explored the hypothetical situations for their potential dangers, and to have thought out ahead of time what should be done and condensed it all into a book that would be required reading for anyone going into space.

If there had been such a book, John Davenport reflected grimly, then when the *Polaris Explorer* crashed, he and the others would all have known that the one thing they must NOT do was have children, start a colony cut off from the rest of humanity. Not without seeds from which to grow vegetation. Not without some other form of animal life, even if it were only some insect species.

The trouble had been that other forms of life were taken for granted and their influence on the human mind was too subtle to be consciously understood. The *fact* of other forms of life was a vital element in shaping human orientation toward reality. Without it—

Yesterday John Davenport had finally seen what would result. A grandson of his, Paul Winstead, now in his early fifties, had paid him a social visit. That is, he had always considered such visits to be social visits, but now he wasn't so sure. For a long time now he hadn't felt up to having anyone but a nurse around, but every so often he felt lonesome, and there was always a waiting list of those who wanted to call on him.

He hadn't seen Paul for two

years, Paul had said, but the last time he could remember seeing Paul was at least thirty years ago. The boy hadn't changed much. He'd always been respectful. The thing is, he was someone to talk to.

"Yup," John had said, reminiscing, "every kid should have a pet or two. When I was a kid I had a dog. A dog is—well, instead of hands and feet it has four feet, but they're very small. The dog is all covered with hair, and it has a tail. A tail is an extension of the spinal cord."

And John had gone on and on, describing the dog. Paul Winstead had been a good listener, nodding and smiling and seeming to get a mental picture of what a dog was like. But he had to use extra imagination.

Then, in a pause, while John was trying to choose a word that would describe what he wanted to say, Paul Winstead had said, very quietly, "You need have no fear, Grandfather John, we have passed the test."

"Test?" John had said. "What test?"

Paul Winstead had chuckled. "We knew that there must be a hidden lesson in your stories," he had said. "Just as your seeming to forget all the time is a living lesson for us to always be alert and meet life every day with renewed interest and excitement, even though nothing new may happen, so also your stories of impossible forms of life are a great lesson to make

us see the wonder of our being the only possible life form."

"But that isn't so!" John had said. "Was Paul insane?"

Paul had smiled. "We knew it was the greatest test of all, because you made it so difficult to penetrate it to the Truth. Yet you cunningly wove into your stories the clue to their being a test. All these animals are deformed people."

John shook his head in protest.

"No, no," Paul had said. "Let me finish. Let me show you we have found the whole Truth. We know that you have always existed. The proof of that is that the only way we can come into existence is by being born of parents like us. We in turn become parents of children like us. There is no other way possible. Therefore the First Parent must always have existed from the beginning of time. But when was the beginning of time? There we have penetrated the secret too! Time, the universe itself, began a little over seventy years ago! You, Grandfather John, are the Absolute, the First, and you created the universe for us, your descendants, to live in and to control. The very atoms obey the rules you laid down for them!"

"Just a minute," John had said firmly. "Some day you or your descendants will meet up with other people, and with other forms of life, like dogs, and trees. What then?"

"We have seen the great lesson in that too," Paul had said, his face shining with an inner light of vision. "As your descendants it is our responsibility to keep your Creation pure. Any imperfection that develops must be corrected. The great message you have shown us is that we are not your First Creation. Somewhere your First Creation exists. But it failed to pass the test, and for that reason we came into being. It failed, and is imperfect, with deformed people of the type you have described. Our destiny, when we have grown strong, is to cleanse the universe of all such deformity."

There had been more of that. John had tried to show it wasn't so, but he had realized how hopeless it was. It was impossible for anyone who has not seen other forms of life to imagine them really existing.

And suddenly it had come to John with blinding insight that if it were impossible while he was still alive to influence them, how much more certain the trend would develop when he was gone!

People simply did not believe something outside their experience.

And with that insight had come an insight into the future. When contact was eventually made with the main branch of humanity, or with any form of life, his descendants would consider it their Divine Mission to destroy it. If, meanwhile, they

had become strong enough, it would mean a devastating holy war with no possible compromise. If contact came within a century or so, it would mean only that his descendants would go down to destruction themselves.

But the basic insight John had gained was that the whole mess could have been easily predicted. It was just one of many similarly predictable things that could happen in space. *Given, an aquarium condition . . .*

So, what should never have happened now had to be destroyed. It had to be, John decided grimly. There were no two ways about it.

But good Lord! Why couldn't mankind have foreseen the possibility of this arising? It was inevitable that over the centuries there would be shipwrecks on out of the way worlds under conditions where the survivors would be able to start a colony that would continue after they died. If the danger had been known ahead of time they would have known better than to have children.

His frown was a deviation. Ada Blake was quick to notice it, and to realize that today was to be different. In what way it would be different she didn't know, nor did it matter. To grant Greatgrandpa John's slightest whim or wish was her greatest desire in life.

Aside from the joy it would bring her, it would mean that

her name would go down in history.

She was too wise to let on that she had noticed the frown. Though her heart pounded furiously, not a flicker of changed expression showed on her face.

"Um," John said.

"Yes?" Ada said mildly.

"Take this synthetic pabulum away and bring me some clothes."

"Yes, Greatgrandpa John," Ada said serenely.

She returned what was left of the breakfast to the cart and pushed it ahead of her out of the room. In the corridor she doubled her pace, arriving at the desk breathless and flushed.

"He wants his clothes!" she gasped. "I think Greatgrandpa John is going out. I could *feel* it. Oh!" She clasped her hands together. "To think it would happen to me!"

"Well, get some clothes for him!" the head nurse said, unable to completely conceal her envy. "Don't keep him waiting! Hurry up!"

Ada was all thumbs and unable to concentrate. It took the combined efforts of the head nurse and two other nurses to get the clothes secured in Ada's hands and steer her in the right direction.

Greatgrandpa John permitted her to dress him. He would rather have dressed himself, but he knew he would have to conserve every ounce of his strength. It was not going to be easy to destroy them all. But

there was a way—or there had been a way.

Panic touched his mind. Maybe there was no longer a way. But there had to be a way. There had to. If *that* way was gone, then he would just have to find another.

Ada dressed him, looking on his withered frame with the sense of privilege uppermost in her mind. Greatgrandpa's body, she felt quite convinced, could have remained youthful forever if he had wished it. It's aging was another of his great lessons to his children, just as were his daily rituals which might have been considered senile forgetfulness in anyone else. Greatgrandpa John knew, she was sure, that everything he did would go down in history, and its lessons would be pondered by the best scholars of each generation, forever.

When he was completely dressed she got to her knees and bowed, covering her secret worship by pretended concern over the bow knots of his shoelaces. She was flushed when she stood up, too conscious of her audience of untold future generations, who would watch the tapes of this historic moment. She had not knelt at Greatgrandpa John's feet for effect, but because she worshiped him.

When she straightened, she stopped breathing for a moment in awe. It had been impossible for her to realize how compelling a figure he was. His blue dress uniform concealed the

leanness of his body. He stood a foot taller than the tallest of other men, his shoulders were wide, wide. His white hair was covered by the cap, and the visor of the cap concealed his forehead so that only his face, his deeply sunken, fiery eyes, his sharply bridged nose, his square chin and firm mouth, could be seen.

"Well?" he said, his lips quirking in amusement.

She tried to speak, and couldn't. The strength of his spirit was beyond her understanding. She could only sense it and tremble.

"Come with me," he said, going past her to the door. "I may need you to lean on, at times." *And I want you with me at the last*, he thought, *because I am afraid*.

And so, side by side, she in her spotless white nurse's uniform, and he, taller than she by fourteen inches and in his blue uniform of Space Command, they walked the length of the corridor, not deigning to notice the head nurse who huddled fearfully behind her desk, and pushed through the double doors to emerge onto the street.

There, John looked up with silent satisfaction at the flat ceiling of yard square panels of glass set in a steel latticework, fifty feet above, and the dozens of widely distributed large balloons resting against their under surface, ready to be caught up in any draft of escaping air caused by a broken panel and

seal the opening until repairs could be made.

Outside, just beyond that flat ceiling above, lay the vacuum of space.

A lot had happened, John Davenport reflected grimly, since that day, almost seventy years ago, when the ship he commanded crashed. It was a shame it was going to have to be destroyed — but it should never have been brought into existence.

The worst part of it was that there was no way to let the government back on Earth know. But if there were, he would not have to do what he knew he must.

Beyond the ceiling of glass, some sixty million miles away, floated a brilliant blue-white sun, much smaller than Sol. But which sun, out of all the millions? The hyperdrive relays had jammed and God knows how many parsecs or thousands of parsecs the ship had gone before repairs could be made. Nine men had given their lives, willingly, each stepping into the fatal area surrounding those relays the instant the one before them dropped, until, after ninety minutes, the last one cut the relays and the ship slipped back into space. Ninety minutes at a theoretically infinite velocity. But that had been ninety minutes ship time, and whether the ship had entered space again a hundred or a million or ninety billion parsecs from the Earth, no

one knew. The pattern of the stars had had no point of positive identification to the ship's instruments.

Ill luck had been present from the start on that "routine" trip from the Sol System to Polaris, and it had stayed to the end. Attempting a simple landing on this eight hundred mile diameter ball of rock for the purpose of setting up instruments capable of probing farther than the ship's instruments, something had again gone wrong, and the ship had been damaged beyond repair.

Stuck here permanently, unless they were eventually rescued, they had built a standard pressurized colony along the lines first used on Mars, of a heavy glass ceiling whose weight was exactly balanced by the air pressure underneath.

Like the castaways on desert islands of pre space travel literature, they had made the most of the materials at hand. A plentiful supply of oxygen lay in the rocks at their feet, as well as the raw material for an inexhaustible supply of glass and steel.

The starship's lifeboats were excellent craft for seaching nearby space and the entire surface of their desert asteroid, and a rich supply of carbon salts had been located and mined for the raw materials of synthetic foods.

When at last they knew that man could live indefinitely on this ball of stone, they had been

happy. If not they, then their children, or their children's children, or their descendants in the nth generation would be rescued.

In their naiveté they had been happy. Like the early peoples of Earth they had lived together, man and woman, and begot child, and child had begot child.

More ceiling and more walls and more atmosphere had expanded the living room until now, after seventy years, there were three square miles of surface where man could live normally.

Fools, they had been. Naive fools, to have brought all this into existence. It had to be stopped. It had to be destroyed.

"Beautiful, isn't it, Great-grandpa John," Ada said, misinterpreting the reason for his silent survey of his surroundings.

John Davenport nodded, and for a moment felt a little confused. *Was he right?* He knew he was right. But what if his reasoning was a product—not of logic—but of senility?

The thought disturbed him.

How many were there now? How many would he have to murder?

"What's the population now?" he asked.

"Four hundred and thirty-one," Ada said proudly. "Our birth rate is close to fifty a year and our death rate only three a year, at present."

"Three in the past year?" John Davenport said. "What killed them?"

If only something showed promise of wiping them all out! That would absolve him.

"One was murdered," Ada said grimly. "The second was his murderer, who was hanged. The third one was my grandmother, Shirl."

"Shirl?" John said, pain cramping his heart. "Why wasn't I told?"

Ada looked up at him serenely, not answering. After a moment he turned away. He felt a vague sense of relief, and it came to him why. He would not be murdering Shirl, nor any of the others who had already died. And these others, even though they were his own descendants, were strangers to him.

"Do you want to see the Elders?" Ada asked. They had been just standing there now for almost ten minutes.

"No," John said curtly. "No. I don't want to see anybody just yet. I just want to—" He looked vaguely around, trying to organize his thoughts into a plan. "I just want to walk around. That's it. Kind of look things over."

He began walking slowly. He would have to go slow, not get too tired, sort of feel his way into things, not go too directly to the power plant.

If he played it right, casual like, they would think it just a sentimental whim when he asked

to be left alone in the reactor control room.

If he played it right. Casual like.

He walked slowly, and paused now and then to pat the heads of children in a secret regretful farewell to them, ignoring the grownups who hovered in the background. And he didn't doubt that if he should fail, a special medal would be run off for the children whose heads he patted to wear all their life to set them off as a class above all those whose heads he had not patted.

Fifty babies in the past year? Let's see, John Davenport mused. There were the four girls, and they had chosen him and Winstead and Blake and White, with the understanding that any of the girls who decided she didn't want the one she chose permanently could pick another of the fifty some odd men. But they stuck, and altogether there had been twenty-three children that lived and grew up, ten of them girls.

That had been the first generation. And Winstead had worked out some system of pairing off the girls with boys so that there would be a minimum of inbreeding in each generation indefinitely, and it had been made into law—not that it would matter much for a couple of generations, but those problems had to be solved and settled by those who knew about such things while they were still alive.

The ten couples of the first

generation had begotten—a good word—seventy-two children. An even number of boys and girls, and they had paired off into thirty-six couples. And Ada, the nurse, was one of their offspring, and no doubt plenty of her generation was producing now. Four hundred and thirty-one was about right, with maybe seventy-five couples in the third generation producing about one child a week. That's what Winstead had figured it would be by now.

John Davenport mentally kicked himself for not keeping up on things, forgetting that he kept up on things daily with avid interest—and forgot them as quickly as he listened to them.

He came back to an awareness of his surroundings.

The streets were laid out nicely. Most of the houses were new, and there were a lot more of them than he would have thought.

Although they had individuality and an attempt at architectural originality, they were all basically designed for The Emergency—loss of atmosphere from a major rupture of the dome. Entrances were potential airlocks. A large meteor could crash through the ceiling of the colony and let all the air escape, and probably no one would die except those directly struck by the meteor.

And there had been recent damage from a meteor. Ada tried to distract his attention away from it, but he saw the

half dozen wrecked houses and the start of reconstruction. Looking overhead, he found the place where the three foot square glass panels glinted with newness and the steel framework was newly painted.

"The whole repair job was being expertly handled.

"Was anyone hurt, Ada?" John asked.

"Fortunately, no, Greatgrandpa John," Ada said.

He worried for a moment about whether she was fibbing, then remembered that it didn't matter.

A lump rose in his throat. *What a terrible tyrant the future is!* he thought bitterly. *The future is molded more by what is not, than by what is.*

He walked slowly, frowning at the pavement ahead of him.

Not a blade of grass. Not a flower. Not even a useless weed. Any one of the crew of the *Polaris Explorer*, as a mere whim, could have carried a million years of plant evolution on board in his coat pocket. A half dozen seeds of each of a thousand plant species.

Or even a few weed seeds trapped in the trouser cuff of some member of the crew. Winstead had looked. Even one seed, or one sliver of wood that could come to life and grow.

Or a fly. Or a louse. Or a family of mice hidden in the cargo.

Or even a spider.

No one had had such a whim.

Why should anyone have had such a foolish whim?

And because no one did, John Davenport was forced to destroy all these descendants of his.

Suddenly a new thought struck him, with such devastating impact that he stumbled, and Ada had to support him. He moaned audibly, not from any physical pain but from the thought.

"Are you sure you're all right?" Ada asked.

"Of course I'm all right," he said, forcing himself to smile calmly. "It's just that—it occurred to me that perhaps this is the last time I will walk through the colony."

"You plan to leave us soon?" Ada asked sadly.

"Perhaps," John Davenport said. Then he saw in this trend of thought the opportunity he had been searching for. He straightened up and squared his shoulders. "For that reason, I would like to pay a last visit to the power plant."

"As you wish," Ada said. "Do you plan to leave us there, Greatgrandpa John?" she asked humbly.

"Perhaps," John Davenport said.

But now a doubt had settled in his mind. Would what he planned to do be any good even if he succeeded? There would be other ships, to other stars, and inevitably another would crash somewhere, and the survivors build a pressurized colony.

Somewhere, sometime, there

would be another Greatgrandpa John and he might not think things through. And if he did, there would be another, and another, until somewhere, sometime, a Greatgrandpa John would die without having destroyed the colony of his descendants.

So what was the use?

The future was inevitable. It flowed from the past like an engulfing flood, and if he plugged the hole here, on this speck of dust in the Cosmos, it would only pile up and burst through somewhere else.

But, if he could stop the flood here, at least he could die knowing that he had succeeded. . . .

The power plant had not changed one iota. At least, not on the outside. It was exactly the same as when it had first been built, seventy years ago.

There was no need for it to change. The nuclear power plant of the ship had been moved out piecemeal and put together again here. Barring accidents, it could produce almost unlimited power forever, if a crew with the know-how to keep it replenished and functioning properly were trained in each generation. Or it could be transformed into a planet buster by manual manipulation of the automatic controls.

Word had gone ahead of them, but that was to be expected. John Davenport had been aware of the many people that hovered in the background, watching him every step. Probably everyone who

could get away from his job was somewhere near, but keeping a respectful distance.

As John approached the power plant entrance four men came out. One of them gave him quite a start, because he looked exactly like Jerry Blake, seventy years ago. For a brief moment, seeing the man there, it seemed to John that time actually had turned back.

Then the illusion was gone. The man who looked like Jerry stepped forward and introduced himself as Mel Davenport, chief engineer.

"Your youngest grandson, sir," Mel Davenport explained.

"How old are you, Mel?" John asked.

"Thirty-five, sir," Mel said. "Would you like to inspect the plant, sir?"

"I think I would, Mel," John said casually.

"We have tried to do everything as you would want us to do it, sir," Mel said as he led the way inside. "For one thing, during the past ten years we've accumulated a stockpile of the alloy blocks and gotten enough of them started on their nuclear cycle to get a duplicate power plant started. We're setting it up a hundred miles from here. In ten years it will have built up to maximum potential and we will be able to build a second colony."

Mel Davenport was talkative, and obviously proud of the accomplishments of the colony. John only half listened as his

youngest grandson talked on and on about the various projects.

The food factories had been expanded again and again, and standby food factories had been built. Exploration of mineral and salt deposits to a depth of five miles had been completed all over the planet. Chemical stockpiling was a hundred years ahead of population growth already.

Mel was quite anxious to prove to him that when he left them he could rest assured that the colony would expand on schedule without a hitch. In two centuries population and industrial development would reach the stage where starships could be manufactured.

John Davenport listened to this bright picture with grim absentmindedness while he walked here and there, refreshing his memory on the layout of the power plant.

Around him, pressing in on him, was the vibrant aura of living, eternal, atomic power, so simplified in principles that a crew of uneducated savages could be taught to keep it going.

But there were no uneducated savages, these descendants of his. They were highly intelligent men, dedicated to their work, and convinced that the know-how given to them was on the order of divine revelation.

Their respect for him was a respect for Deity, rather than for an ancestor. To themselves they were high priests rather than engineers.

And nothing he could say could change that.

The alternative to his being God was a nightmare of insecurity they could not possibly accept. He had watched it grow, helpless to prevent it. They had built up a framework of rationalization that had a perfect defense against all logical attack.

Being God, he could not grow old and feeble, but he could *choose* to appear to grow old and feeble as a lesson to them to honor their old ones as they loved Him. Being God, he could not forget from one minute to the next, but he could pretend to, as a lesson to them to be eternally alive to the eternal newness of each moment.

Yes, his deification in their philosophy had been inevitable from the start, and he had not bothered to set them straight because in the long run it would be a good thing. It would give them security, dedication to the welfare of the community.

Nor would it ever have become a bad thing—if there had been so much as cockroaches in the store of crackers aboard the *Polaris Explorer*.

But there had been nothing. Winstead had searched. They had all searched. God how they had searched! Just one seed that could sprout, or one insect that could be made to reproduce. Any form of life at all that could be made to survive and be a fellow life form, a companion to man, in this far off place.

"You've seen it all now, sir."

John Davenport returned to reality with a feeling of alarm. He looked desperately at the control panels.

"Nothing has been changed here?" he asked sharply.

"Of course not, sir!" Mel said, shocked at the thought.

Of course not. John breathed easier. His eyes went to the damper rod control panel. Behind that panel lay the fool proof computer bank, the brains of the power plant. Fool proof—but there was a way to fool it and that way still existed. And it would turn the pile into a five hundred megaton bomb.

"Do you have any wish, sir?" Mel asked.

"Yes," John Davenport said. "I want to be alone for a few moments. Please wait outside. All of you."

They moved toward the exit. John Davenport stood erect, broad shouldered, every inch the Captain, in his blue uniform, in the center of the power plant floor.

At last he was alone.

It would take only a moment to reverse the connections from zero and maximum load.

John Davenport took a step toward the control panel, then hesitated. Was he right? Was the thought that had come to him last night the product of logic—or senility?

He lifted it into consciousness again and examined it dispassionately.

The human mind is utterly incapable of conceiving of anything totally outside its experience. In an environment where there is only one life form—man himself—and no other, man must inevitably become an Absolute to himself, and even the idea of a life form other than his own must become impossible to conceive.

Oh, they had tried to tell their children about trees and flowers and dogs and birds, but it had been obvious the children's conception of other life forms had been much like anyone's conception of hyperspace—an extrapolation from the known, the experienced. How could a generation pass on to succeeding generations something which it could not grasp itself? Even now, to Ada and the others of the third generation, a conception of a dog, or a blade of grass, was impossible. What then of the nth generation, millions or billions strong?

Logic would tell them the human form is an Absolute of nature. By the same token the technology and the knowledge they had inherited would be divine revelation, and he, John Davenport, would be their God.

Confronted with the parent civilization, as they would be eventually, their instinct would be to destroy, in a holy war of extermination. They could never accept and embrace something that was an affront to the basic Absolutes of their philosophy.

A planet such as the Earth

would be the unimaginable extreme of unclean horror, where the stench of rotting and fermenting vegetation would cause them to faint, and a dog walking down the street would be to them a blasphemy against the purity of the universe itself! And man, living by devouring the dead remains of such abominations, would be more horrible to them than medieval man's conception of the fiends in hell.

That was the realization that had come to him last night, in the quiet of his room.

The nth generation of his descendants would become a destroying behemoth, cleansing the universe in a holy crusade, and totally incapable of compromise. Compromise? It would be easier for a civilized man on Earth to abandon his own Absolutes and wallow in the mire with his hogs and consider them his equal.

Yes, that would happen, unless he, right now, destroyed the potential destroying monster he had let come into existence.

John Davenport took another step toward the control panel. It would be only the work of a moment. He knew exactly what to do. He wouldn't even need any tools. He could lift out the right panel and break the fine wires with his fingers and reconnect them. Then the computer, in seeking for stability of the pile, would have all its directives reversed.

But again he hesitated. He was right. He knew beyond

doubt that he was right. But was he? Was it possible he was wrong?

And even if he were right, even if he did this thing, and destroyed his children, what of the next starship that became wrecked on some sterile world too far from home for hope of rescue?

And the next? And the next?

If what he believed must happen would become inevitable if he didn't cross those two fine wires under the panel, *was it not just as inevitable if he did?*

Somewhere, sometime. . . .

And suddenly he knew he couldn't go through with it.

The same psychological principles that made his logic about what must eventually happen valid made it impossible for him to stop it here and now. He had never killed anything in his life, he could not force himself to kill now. Not, at least, for an abstract idea.

He reached out and touched the panel, but he did not lift it out. Regretfully he let his hand drop away from it.

Turning away from the control panel, he went with faltering, weary step toward the door beyond which his children's children awaited him with an absolute trust such as they could have given only to their God.

Of course he was wrong, he was already beginning to tell himself in the process of rationalization. He was getting senile. Why, he might have done that

(Continued on page 74)

THE TALENTED PROGENITOR

By ALGIS BUDRYS

*You've heard the geneticists' theme song?
—A good man nowadays is hard to find.*

CHIEF! CHIEF! I've found Trebuchet!"

Coleman-Long's voice was breathless as he burst into Danbury-Morse's office, the yellow radiocopy sheet fluttering in his hand.

Danbury-Morse's gray-browed, craggy face did not change. "Sit down, Sam," he told his assistant evenly in a deep, rumbling voice. "Make haste slowly." He puffed a cigar into light, swung his leather chair around to face the desk, and switched off the scanner he'd been watching when Coleman-Long's hasty knock and precipitous entrance had interrupted him. The ghostly afterimages of bar graphs faded from the screen.

Danbury-Morse was an imperturbable man. In his position, he had to be. Public office

was a public trust, and he had a reputation to maintain.

"Found Trebuchet, have you?" he asked mildly, leaning slightly forward, his pale blue eyes not quite as calm as the rest of his face.

Coleman-Long held out the sheet. "Our Jacksonville office located him in St. Petersburg. He's staying at a hotel. We've got him staked out. We won't lose him now."

Danbury-Morse smiled slightly. "Relax, Sam. You're acting as though he were Public Enemy Number One. Of course you found him—and of course we won't lose him. He's only one man, and we've got the organization. What's more, I doubt if he's ever had the faintest idea there was any reason for him to hide."

Coleman-Long moved his

hands impatiently. "I know, Chief, I know. But—but this is *Trebuchet!*"

"So it is," Danbury-Morse murmured as he scanned the report from Jacksonville. "So it is." He leaned back in the leather chair and puffed softly on the cigar.

"How many years since the Plague, Sam?" he asked idly.

Coleman-Long frowned in concentration for a moment. "About sixty, Chief."

"Um-hmm. Thank you." Danbury-Morse put the sheet down and tented his spatulate fingers. "How many years since the start of the Utilization Plan?"

"Uh—fifty-five."

"Thank you." Danbury-Morse looked up at the framed picture of Hollister, the first Plan Bureau Chief, which hung above the filing cabinets along the opposite wall.

"I remember when I first came to work for the Old Man," he reminisced in a soft voice. "The national population had just been censused at forty-three million, give or take a few hundred thousand. And most of them scattered into isolated pockets and belts the Plague had skipped over. We were too disorganized to maintain even a minimum civilization. That was a gloomy time, Sam. The Old Man had us all working twelve hours a day, eight on Sunday, and still there were times when it looked like we couldn't make it—especially since so few peo-

ple seemed to understand that we had to get organized *first*, and repopulate *second*. That was uphill work all the way, Sam. But, bit by bit, we gathered them together and made a new nation. We found farmers trying to scratch a subsistence living out of ground their ancestors had worked to the bone, and we persuaded them to give it up and become lathe-hands. We took specialists in vacuum tube design, their abilities useless because the circuitry experts in their area were gone, and shipped them a thousand miles to staff a tractor plant. We went into the colleges and made electronics technicians out of physics teachers. We learned that a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush—we took our stitches in time. Some of us cracked under the strain. I don't know how many aptitude tests I supervised myself, back in those days."

"Who was the first one, Chief?" Coleman-Long asked, "Trebuchet-Tucker?"

Danbury-Morse nodded. "That is right. We had just gotten the gasoline industry into some kind of running order when Trebuchet-Tucker invented the Perfect Combustion engine. It was a tremendous advance—but we had to scrap that section of the Plan and re-train all our refinery technicians, keeping a few and placing the rest in natural gas."

"And then there was Trebuchet-Wattson, wasn't it?"

Coleman-Long asked. "Just as the railroad complex began working again."

"That's right, Sam. Trebuchet-Wattson, and his condensing steam-jet. That didn't dislocate things too much. But when we had to broaden all the right-of-ways, we lost thousands of acres of farmland and industrial sites. That meant revamping a good deal of the Plan. But it was worth it, Sam—the over-all increase in the rate of technological progress brought our return to stable inter-dependence that much closer. It doesn't matter that the Bureau had to keep revising the Plan."

Danbury-Morse looked at Holister's picture again. "We lost some good men, Sam. We lost the best of them after Trebuchet-Bismarck became Secretary of the Interior and the Old Man butted heads with him once too often.

"Trebuchet-MacReigh and his voice-operated typewriter," Danbury-Morse ticked off on his fingers. "Trebuchet-Sabacka and Reflexive Psychiatry. Trebuchet-Chillnate and the Rugged Individual movement. Trebuchet-Karid and Inverse Calculus. The Old Man Cracked, Sam. I had a tremendous respect for him, Sam, but that's the plain truth. When Trebuchet-Alvarez came up with Pseudo-dynamic Sound-wave Mechanics, and the radio and television programs had to be scrapped and re-constituted

for the fourth time in ten years, the Old Man couldn't take it. He started working on Trebuchet-Bismarck for restrictive legislation.

"Trebuchet - Bismarck was right, Sam. The Old Man's attitude had gone sour. Instead of trying to fight the facts, he should have expanded the Plan to include them. But the Old Man was getting pretty old by then. His flexibility was gone, and his nerves were shot. I think it was best that he resigned."

Danbury-Morse brushed the report sheet with his fingertips.

"We finally solved the problem, Sam. We've found that tremendous wellspring of genius. Trebuchet-Long has invented the personal transciever, and Trebuchet-Smith has painted '*Nativity and Crucifixion*,' and Trebuchet-French has developed Steakyeast. The Old Man would not recognize the society we live in. But, at last, the Plan has gotten big enough to include Trebuchet. Now we can find out where that tremendous group of genes came from, and how to systematize its infusion into the culture."

"Yes, Chief," Coleman-Long said.

"You know, Sam," Danbury-Morse remarked as they strolled down the sun-drenched street, adjusting their Trebuchet-Martin solar screens, "it's interesting."

"What, Chief?"

"Our culture, Sam. Have you ever read Trebuchet-Anderson's book on Twentieth Century morés? It's called *'Prisoners of Population.'*"

"I don't believe I've heard of it, Chief. What's it about?"

"It points out that most of our ancestor's problems stemmed directly from their marriage and divorce laws. The incredible pressure of marrying for life, or close to it, and the expensive difficulty of getting a divorce, set up psychological and social strains of overwhelming magnitude. Whether Twentieth Century Man realized it or not, his aggression toward his fellow men was nothing but a sublimated urge to get rid of his wife, and his general restlessness was a reflection of his desire to just plain get out of the house for a while. But there was nothing they could do. There were so many of them that the social matrix forced them toward one mate, whom they generally disliked, thereby limiting population growth by a kind of automatic mechanism."

"That's fascinating, Chief."

"Yes, it is, Sam." Danbury-Morse said, stopping in front of the hotel to which Trebuchet had been traced. "Here we are."

"Yes, Chief. There's Trebuchet-Keene, the man from our Jacksonville office."

The Bureau operative came out of his car at Coleman-Long's signal. He was an undistinguished man, except for the prognathous jaw that hallmark-

ed his ancestry. Below medium height, with his pale skin freckled by the sun, he took Danbury-Morse's extended hand and shook it weakly.

"Very glad to meet you, Chief," he said in his congenital undertone. "He's inside, up in his room. I don't think he suspects anything."

"Very good work, Trebuchet-Keene. Well, let's go," Danbury-Morse said. They entered the hotel lobby, and crossed to the elevators. Trebuchet-Keene handed two ascensor bars to Coleman-Long and the chief, having set their dials for the proper floor, and took one himself. Wincing uncomfortably, he stepped into the shaft and led the way. Danbury-Morse noted that he carefully kept from looking down.

"I understand one of your cousins invented these elevators," Danbury-Morse remarked.

Trebuchet-Keene nodded unhappily. "Trebuchet-Otis. Makes my stomach turn over," he replied. He stepped out into the proper hall with a sigh of relief.

"This way, Chief." Trebuchet-Keene pointed out a door. "He's in there." He hesitated. "Chief—do you mind if I don't go in with you?"

"Not if you've got a good reason, son. What is it?"

"Well, sir, he divorced my mother when I was only about eight months old. It wasn't any pinch, what with the government bonus, but—well, I don't know,

he's pretty much of an old-fashioned man; bound to be; born under the old system, and everything. He might expect some kind of special affection from me—I don't know . . ."

"Of course, son. We won't need you anyway, will we, Sam?"

"I don't think so, Chief," Coleman-Long said.

"All right, then," Danbury-Morse said, stepping up to Trebuchet's door and knocking.

"Who is it?"

The voice from the other side of the door was obviously old, as well as low.

"Utilization Plan Bureau, Mr. Trebuchet," Danbury-Morse replied. "May we come in?"

"Help yourself."

Danbury-Morse pressed the doorplate, and the door opened, showing a white-haired, shrunken version of Trebuchet-Keene, sitting in a chair facing the Gulf of Mexico. As Danbury-Morse and Coleman-Long came in, he turned his head stiffly to look at them.

"Howdy," he said. "Sit down." He pushed his own chair around to face them. He was obviously quite old. "You gentlemen sure you got the right Trebuchet? I'm just plain Joe Trebuchet, not one of those double-barrelled kids of mine. Figures that if you're lookin' for somebody bright to put in some job, you'd want one of them. I'm getting pretty old to work."

Danbury-Morse coughed with

some embarrassment. "No, Mr. Trebuchet, it's you we want to speak to. This is Sam Coleman-Long, my assistant, and I'm Arthur Danbury-Morse, Chief of the Bureau. It's very good of you to give us some of your time."

"Got lots of time, Mr. Morse. Nothin' to do. What can I do for you?"

"Well . . ." Danbury-Morse scratched his ear, "I don't precisely know how to put this. You're aware of the remarkable strain of genius in your children?"

Trebuchet grinned proudly. "Pretty good bunch. I read about 'em in the papers, every once in a while. Makes a man feel kind of happy. 'Cept about Johnnie, of course. That's Trebuchet-Dillinger—broke out of Leavenworth last week?"

Danbury - Morse coughed again. "Yes, of course. I recall the item. Not under my jurisdiction, however."

The old man grinned wickedly. "Johnnie always was a helion, from what I hear. Funny, how I met his mother. Same way as it was with all the rest, but you wouldn't expect it, you know? Met her at a racetrack—picking my pocket, she was. Took one look at her, she took one look at me—bingo, we went off and got married. No questions, no talk—just went off."

"That's very interesting, Mr. Trebuchet," Danbury - Morse said, "but we're here to request your coming back with us. You

see, we'd like to conduct some tests and—uh—Sam . . .”

“—Kind of see what makes you tick, Mr. Trebuchet,” Coleman-Long supplied.

“That’s right, Mr. Trebuchet,” Danbury-Morse affirmed.

Trebuchet grinned. “Well, that’s darned nice of you fellows, but I don’t know—you know my youngest kid is about twenty-three by now. Young Trebuchet-Edison.”

Danbury - Morse coughed. “Well—yes, of course, but I’m sure the gene-structure . . .”

Trebuchet snorted. “Got nothin’ to do with my genes.”

“Oh?” Danbury-Morse inquired politely.

“I was tellin’ you before, when you interrupted me. About young Johnnie Trebuchet-Dillinger’s mother. Ugly woman. To look at her, you’d figure nobody in this world’d marry her. I figured the same, after Johnnie came along. Like turning off a light. I took one look at her, and bingo! I decided I’d better clear out before things got too permanent. Couldn’t’a stood it.

“Same story with all the rest. Mamie Bismarck couldn’t cook nothin’ without potatoes in it. Pearl Sabacka was the teadrinkin’est woman I ever heard of. Like that right down the line. But I couldn’t help myself.

I’d see ’em in line at the movies, or pass ’em on the street—blooey!—I *had* to marry ’em. Both of us’d go silly about each other. Then, year, year and a half later, blooey! again. Romance out like a light, and me out of the house right behind it. No, sir, Mr. Morse, genes got nothin’ to do with it. I just had one thing—and I figure, in my own way, I was doin’ the same thing you are. I had a talent for findin’ women with good blood in ’em somewhere.” Trebuchet pushed his chair back around, and sat looking out over the Gulf again. “Can’t do it no more, though. Sure gets lonely.”

“Let me—let me digest this,” Danbury-Morse faltered. “This process of—uh—selection was entirely involuntary on your part? You had no control over it? And, of course, it’s left you now?”

“That’s right, Mr. Morse,” Trebuchet said in his low, old voice. “It looks to me like if you’re looking for somebody else like me, you just got to wait until results start showin’ up, and by then it’s too late to test.”

“Are you sure, Mr. Trebuchet?”

“Only talent I ever showed.” Trebuchet chuckled reminiscently. “Just doin’ the best I could. Bein’ human.”

THE END



REVERSE ENGLISH

By LES COLLINS

*On television writers don't die—
they just become secret weapons.*

5504 Clinton Ave.
Altadena, California
January 30, 1958

Public Information Officer
March Air Force Base
California

Dear Sir:

I am a writer working on a TV play concerning the long range mission of a B-52. Unfortunately, my knowledge of this craft is slight. Would you be kind enough to answer the following questions?

How many are there in the crew, and what are their ranks? Is the physical internal layout different from that of the B-36? What about the armament?

I realize this letter might be asking questions which may fall in the area of classified information. If so, would you supply answers as close as possible to the information desired. I'd rather write about something obsolete than something I've made up and obviously wrong.

Sincerely yours,
George Mark

TO: Capt. Norman Goodman
FROM: 1st Lt. Lawrence Kelley
SUBJECT: B-52 Inquiry, M73a
Sir:

I have received the enclosed letter. According to the standard directive, I am forwarding this to you.

TO: Capt. Harry Robertson
FROM: Capt. Norman Goodman
SUBJECT: B-52 Inquiry, M73b
Sir:

Enclosed is the correspondence on this. Preliminary investigation reveals nothing untoward here. Please handle this.

(Harry:

I'm handwriting this unofficial PS, and I'd like you to destroy it when you've finished. As you know, I've been tied up in knots with Project Freak—I wouldn't even be mentioning it if I didn't know full well you had your grimy paws in it too—and maybe I didn't do as good a job as possible on the investigation of this. Or maybe it's just that when you get conditioned to the Office of Special Investigation, you get leery of everyone. But there's something about that letter I don't like. Keep your eyes open—even though I'm probably just an old woman suspicious of a good US citizen asking for information to which he is rightfully entitled. You know that old cliché about an ounce of prevention.

My condolences again about Freak. Will never understand this man's AF; they take a brilliant physicist and stick him in Public Relations!

Best,
Norm)

5504 Clinton Ave.
Altadena, California
February 26, 1958

Capt. Harry Robertson
Office of Information Services
93d Air Base Group

Castle Air Force Base
California

Dear Capt. Robertson:

This is to acknowledge your reply to my letter. I want to thank you with deepest gratefulness, and I realize the delay in answering me was due to my having sent the letter to the wrong air base.

Frankly, the press kit you sent did overwhelm me. It was quite complete with its glossy photographs and newspaper releases.

My thanks, too, for your offer of further assistance. I'm sure I will take advantage of that.

Incidentally, I have cast you as a character in the play. This is my way of thanking those who have helped me.

Sincerely yours,
George Mark

TO: Capt. Norman Goodman
FROM: Capt. Harry Robertson
SUBJECT: B-52 Inquiry, M73c
Sir:

Enclosed is further correspondence relating to the above named case.

(Norm:

As you requested, I'm keeping my eyes open. Here's another letter. The probability is that this Mark is ok, but it strikes me that if he really were an agent, his last bit of flattery would be just the device to employ to gain confidence.

How's the freak coming? (Don't answer that!) I can make some intelligent guesses, though. Give it a year—say, March of '59

—and we'll have such a corker that no one would dare try attacking. But that isn't what excites me. Think of the peaceful applications! In truth—and pardon the corn—Man will have achieved his highest existence. Plenty for all, and yeah, that includes the joes on the other side. There just won't be any reason for war. I can hardly wait.

Most,
Harry)

(Harry:

Just a quickie; we're miserably swamped. However, I want you to know that I'm assigning a man to give Mark a full treatment. When he gets through investigating, we'll know once and for all whether we can forget the whole business.

Norm)

5504 Clinton Ave.
Altadena, California
April 19, 1958

Capt. Harry Robertson
Office of Information Services
93d Air Base Group
Castle Air Force Base
California

Dear Captain Robertson:

My play is coming along nicely, thanks to you. So nicely, in point of fact, that I need more information.

Would it be possible for me to get photographs of the interior of the bomber, particularly the upper and lower decks and tail gun position? Much of the action takes place here, and it is necessary for me to structure my

scenes properly. I have to get the "feel" of the ship.

Another thing: the plot calls for the radio to be sabotaged, and contact with the bomber attempted by a fighter. I had in mind a Republic photo-recon plane, RF84F. To whom should I write to get information about it?

Thank you for your time and trouble.

Sincerely yours,
George Mark

TO: Capt. Norman Goodman
FROM: Capt. Harry Robertson
SUBJECT: B-52 Inquiry, M73d
Sir:

Enclosed is a letter from Mr. Mark which should interest you. Would you be kind enough to take action on this.

5504 Clinton Ave.
Altadena, California
May 12, 1958

Capt. Harry Robertson
Office of Information Services
93d Air Base Group
Castle Air Force Base
California

Dear Capt. Robertson:

Some time ago I wrote you requesting further information. I need this before I can continue with the writing of my play. You are probably quite busy, but if it is at all possible, please expedite a reply.

Sincerely yours,
George Mark

TO: Capt. Norman Goodman
FROM: Capt. Harry Robertson

SUBJECT: B-52 Inquiry, M73e
Sir:

Enclosed is further correspondence concerning the above named case. May I have some word as to proper action?

(Norm:

For crying out loud, what's happening? I haven't heard from you. I'd say offhand, from the tone of Mark's latest, that he must be OK. It's beginning to smack of irate-taxpayerism, and I doubt if an enemy agent could phony *that*—it's too much a part of the culture. But get me off the hook, huh?

Meanwhile, stay as anonymous as you are. I tried to find something recently about your Intelligence work on freak—through channels, of course—and I'm ready to swear even the Government has no records on you or the project!

Thine,
Harry)

TO: Capt. Harry Robertson
FROM: Capt. Norman Goodman
SUBJECT: B-52 Inquiry, M73f
Sir:

This office agrees the information desired by Mr. Mark should be given him. Please comply with this request.

(Harry:

Sorry to keep you hanging for so long, but I've had a peck of trouble lately. In addition to everything else, I lost the man who was investigating Mark.

Don't gasp with horror, lad. It

was a not-so-good, old-fashioned plane crash, and the fact our investigator was aboard was simply unfortunate coincidence. Believe me, we investigated thoroughly. If it *was* sabotage, a master hand was at work. But there simply was no evidence of such.

Prior to the accident, our agent, who'd done a fairly complete job, had found nothing questionable in Mark's background. In fact, he found almost nothing. Just a common, everyday peepul. So let's cross Mark off our list—give him what he wants.

Regards,
Norm)

5504 Clinton Ave.
Altadena, California
May 17, 1958

Capt. Harry Robertson
Office of Information Services
93d Air Base Group
Castle Air Force Base
California

Dear Captain Robertson:

I'm sorry; I had no idea that you were on leave, or I wouldn't have been quite so impatient. Let me make haste to apologize. I appreciate your attention.

I have received your packet of additional information, and it certainly has helped. In point of fact, it tells me completely what I wished to know.

You won't be sorry—I shall treat the Air Force with utmost consideration, the same consideration with which I have been treated.

Many thanks.

Sincerely yours,
George Mark

TO: Kapush Tindl Barj
FROM: Kapush greGoe Marrhuk
SUBJECT: Planet,
Investigation of
Sir:

Having completed my investigation of the ethnic unit with the most advanced scientific-materialism on this planet, I am now ready to make my recommendations.

It is very apparent that not only will they be unable to oppose any landing, but further they will be unable to attack the fleet once we are established.

It will be necessary to kill a few of the natives simply to show them we mean what we say. I think they'll come around then. However, I most strongly urge that we do not interfere more than necessary with their culture; they consider their "way of life" most important, and transgressions against it will cause trouble. In this planet's case, I think the best idea is to take our normal 30 percent of annual production and be done with it.

I have one favor to ask. It's sort of a gesture—I'd appreciate it if, when you occupy, you'd not subject the military organization devoted to flying aircraft to more than a few scattered example cases.

The best time for occupation will be in 62 galactic standard days. The natives have a holiday ("Christmas") then that will make our occupation time even more propitious.

A report much more detailed than this will be forwarded immediately; it will support my conclusions with data.

On a personal note, I rather wish our Ethical Law of Privacy did not hold! Sacrilege, I know, but I'm rather proud of the job I've done here, and I'd like to explain how it was accomplished.

1793 Stanley Street
Los Angeles, California
March 2, 1959

Kapush Tindl Barj
Imperial Space Fleet Base
Nevada

Your Sial Kapush:

I am a human writer working on a TV play concerning the Imperial Fleet. Unfortunately, my knowledge of your craft is slight. Would it be possible, without transgressing your military security, for me to have information concerning crews, internal physical layout, and armament?

I think you will like this play since it exposes you to a good, bright light. It is about a rather silly human who continues to fight when you've obviously won. I'm calling it "Freak"!

Sincerely yours,
Norman Goodman

Question: should we pour all our money, brains and energy into space travel when we haven't tidied up our own house yet? Will we land on Sirius IV only to see a sign that says—

EARTHMAN, KEEP OUT!

By DR. ARTHUR BARRON

YOU'RE not going to like this article. Not a bit. You're a space buff, or you wouldn't be reading *Amazing*. And this article makes the point that everyone, our government especially, is a little lunatic on the subject of space. To add insult to injury, this article further contends that instead of wasting time and money in a lot of visionary space programs, we would be better off spending our time, money, and energies on down-to-earth problems.

Space Hysteria

By every objective measure, this nation is space happy. The American Rocket Society is lobbying the government to appropriate billions for space stations. Space experts like Von Braun predict dire disaster if

we fail to beat Russia to the moon. Pentagon officials agree. The Congress has established a Space Commission to facilitate conquest of the interplanetary reaches. The public hangs breathlessly on every news story about rockets and lunar probes. Impressive numbers of citizens petition Congress, private business, and the military services for the privilege of being on the first rocket ship to the moon. As far back as 1933 a woman filed an application for land on the moon for her six grandchildren. Today, the US Bureau of Land Management receives several file claims each week. It keeps the requests in a special file pending further action. To all inquiries it lamely replies that "Until there is some legal basis for regarding moon lands as public lands of the US,

there is no means or method by which they may be officially claimed or obtained by anyone." Science fiction writers and fans, of course, already consider inter-planetary travel mere child's play and already are champing at the launching pad in their eagerness to get Man into interstellar space.

Even lawyers are getting into the act. The American Bar Association has established a Subcommittee on Space Law. Already more than 200 articles have appeared in the law journals, most of these within the last six months. Already, lawyers are arguing space questions: Who owns outer space? How can a nation be sued when one of its satellites spews debris on private property in other nations? Is TV reconnaissance from outer space an act of aggression? In the UN, both Russia and the United States have introduced resolutions bearing on the control of outer space for peaceful and humanitarian purposes.

The Octopus and the Crab

But how realistic is all this? How practical and sensible are plans for space flight? How justified are the huge expenditures now being made in space development?

Not practical, or sensible, or justifiable at all it seems. Consider the case of the octopus and the crab. As Dr. Joseph Barmack, a foremost expert in

military human engineering points out, there is a good analogy here.

In 1920 interesting experiments were conducted on the responses of crabs to external threat. A crab was tied by its foot to a stake under water. When an octopus was placed near it, the crab broke free by wrenching off its foot. But in another experiment, a different crab tied to a stake not far from food starved to death rather than lose a foot.

What do the experiments conclude? Crabs, it appears, prefer amputation to death dealt by an octopus. But they prefer starvation to amputation.

The implication of this for human behavior? Perhaps we are willing to meet the Soviet space challenge even at great cost and danger to ourselves, but prefer to ignore the risk of defeat in other significant areas.

Is Space Worth It?

Assume for the moment that the enormously complex physiological and engineering problems of space flight have been solved. Now consider just the expense factor involved in a space program alone. It is a staggering consideration. Engineers calculate that for each pound of payload, designers must add 10 pounds of weight to the design of a rocket itself. But the payload weight requirements of a space station or

rocket ship are astronomical. Consider the weight involved in such indispensable items as steel oxygen tanks, space suits, food, tools, water, radiation, shielding, cooling systems. The weight runs into thousands of tons.

But this is terribly expensive. The American Rocket Society calculates the cost of a round trip manned rocket to the moon at 4 billion dollars. This must be considered low, since it is clearly in the interests of the Society to play down the expense. Military leaders come up with a more realistic cost: 30 billions.

Yet this is the cost in money alone! What of the cost in talent? Already space work is taking the time of hundreds of our top scientists and engineers. As time passes, an even greater proportion of our scientific elite will be absorbed in such work. Many of our top industrial management people are also involved. It seems at least debatable that these valuable people might be of better use in other areas of work, that the money now expended on space development might be better spent elsewhere, where it would do more good.

Charity Begins At Earth

While scientists loose themselves in delightful visions of interstellar adventure, and while officials appropriate lavish sums for space research, a

few stubborn problems remain to be licked on earth:

Like Cancer: Last year roughly 250,000 people died of it, yet only \$45 million was spent on research.

Like Heart Disease: Last year over 800,000 people died of it. But only \$32 million was spent on research.

Like Education: We do not have nearly enough schools and colleges to meet the demand. The situation will get worse in the coming years.

Like Housing: Our cities are terribly over-crowded and living space is expensive.

And this is to say nothing of the need for expansion of expenditures in areas directly affecting national survival. Foreign aid, for example. And propaganda. And conventional arms. Allocations sufficient to meet the Soviet challenge in these areas are as important, even more important, than allocations to match Soviet penetration of space.

Rebuttal?

By now you should be plenty angry. What is this nonsense, you're thinking? Obscurantism! Anti-intellectualism! Defeatism! That's what, you charge.

But do the charges hold up? What real advantages would conquest of space actually bring us now?

The alleged military benefits,

despite reams of PR releases from the Pentagon, are dubious. To begin with, doesn't it make much more sense at present to build Polaris, a submarine-launched IBM, than a rocket launching space platform? The former is just as destructive, easier to build, and far cheaper. This makes especially good sense since the odds against pinpointing a target from outer space are very high. As for the supposed reconnaissance value of a space platform telescope or TV, this also is over-rated. Jamming is a problem and long range TV viewing is far from adequate, even for use from a plane. Besides, there are better means of reconnaissance now. These include the usual intelligence activities, advanced sonar and radar, and sophisticated photographic devices. Moreover, a space station would be an obvious target for enemy missiles.

The benefit of space travel to Man's spirit, dignity, imagination, soul, and all other qualities praised by the poets is indisputable and important. But in the war for survival with the Soviets, do they provide sufficiently compelling reasons to neglect more pressing matters of defense? Also, isn't the earth, with all its unconquered aspects both material, social, and spiritual sufficient arena for Man's spirit at present?

Any economic benefit from space travel must be considered absurdly naive at this point.

Colonization of the planets is certainly centuries or more away. Extraction of natural resources for return to earth is out of the question merely for the costs involved, if for no other reason. There is no present financial payoff in space.

Space travel as a means of expanding the frontiers of scientific knowledge does have merit. This is undeniable. But what are the priorities? Why is cosmic ray study, astronomy, geography and the like thought to be any more urgent or important than earth-bound medical research, psychology, sociology?

Perhaps the best case for space development can be made in terms of its propaganda impact in the cold war. It is no accident that toy models of Sputnik I were the fast selling items at the souvenir counters of the Brussels World Fair. Sputnik unquestionably captured the imagination of the world. The Soviet scoop on us in launching the first earth satellite did enormous damage to our reputation and image throughout the world. It is probable that a first successful Soviet moon shot, a first Soviet space platform, a first Soviet **anything** in space will hurt us in the psychological cold war. Especially in the under-developed nations of the world, where the desire for technological progress reaches fanatical intensity, Soviet space achieve-

(Continued on page 145)

THE SPECTROSCOPE

by S. E. COTTS

A TOUCH OF STRANGE. By *Theodore Sturgeon*. 262 pp. Doubleday & Co. \$2.95.

This is a brilliantly executed book of short pieces by one of the best S-F writers active today. This reviewer's admiration began some years back after being introduced to his novel, *More Than Human*. Sturgeon's new collection still merits that admiration but in a different and somewhat disturbing way. It is admiration for a craftsman-like job instead of for the haunting, bittersweet aura that was the hallmark of some of his other work.

Each story represents an abrupt change in tone from the preceding one. At first, this seems to be a remarkable achievement, but by the end of the book one longs for a certain similarity, some thread between one tale and the next which can be grasped as the stamp of Sturgeon. The chameleon-like changes that he employs in this collection tend to destroy his individuality instead of emphasizing it.

Many of the stories this time seem to revolve around a plot twist that is too thin to hold up the rest of the story, such as "Mr. Costello, Hero"; "The Pod in the Barrier"; and "The Girl Had Guts." In addition, the last mentioned story is more graphic than it need be, so that one is left with the impression that the details were included for shock value rather than for any integral relation to the plot.

Only three of the stories are reminiscent of what is best in Sturgeon, most notably "The Other Celia." This particular one is so good that it is possible to start forgetting the less successful ones in the volume. After all, it is an amazing writer who can whet our appetites for more after reading two bad stories for every one that is good.

STAR GATE. By *Andre Norton*. 192 pp. Harcourt, Brace and Co. \$3.00.

Andre Norton has written another distinguished book in which to display her unique talents. She has a gift that is common to the finest writers of historical fiction such as Zoë Oldenburg. This is the ability to recreate not just a physical description of another time and place, but to give such life to the actual sounds and smells that the reader becomes an active participant. What makes Miss Norton's accomplishment even more remarkable is that not only does her setting not exist now, it never did at any time except in her imagination.

A long time before, Star Lords had come to live on the planet, Gorth. During their stay they raised the Gorthians from savages to men of a feudal-type civilization. Then disagreement arose as to whether to give their advanced gifts of technology to the Gorthians or not. Some Star Lords fled the planet; others stayed until a battle with the Gorthians forced them to flee through the Star Gate, a marvelous device permitting transmigration in time between parallel worlds. The Gorth they found on the other side of the Gate was a completely different one. Could the refugees survive in a world which seemed similar and yet was so terrifying?

Andre Norton again fills the reader's expectations in this novel as she traces the adventures of Kincar of Styr, a young warrior of mixed Star and Gorthian blood.

EDGE OF TIME. *By David Grinnell. 221 pp. Avalon Books. \$2.75.*

This is one in a long line of S-F books whose potential is completely stunted by pasteboard characters and empty dialogue. Yet the book is not completely hopeless. The sparks of some fine ideas are there if you are willing to fish for them under a mass of trivia. It almost seems as if the author was afraid to follow where his imagination led him and threw up a smoke screen to try to mask what he had revealed.

There is no need to go into the plot here; it is not very exciting. One can only bemoan the fact that Mr. Grinnell, like so many others, is not willing to make that extra effort so that his prose would be a more precise vehicle of his thought.

UNTO THE Nth GENERATION

(Continued from page 57)

foolish thing! He wasn't to be trusted any more.

He reached out to the door to open it. For a moment he hesitated, and in his mind's eye rose the conviction of certainty. If he opened the door now, it would then be too late, and it would happen and his chance to

stop it would be gone forever.

But even if he stopped it here and now, somewhere, sometime, in some other far off place, it would still happen. . . .

Or maybe it wouldn't.

He pushed open the door, and suddenly all of his years settled down over his shoulders.

THE END

...OR SO YOU SAY

(Continued from page 7)

people in an extraordinary way, like "The Day of the Triffids" by John Wyndham, or stories about not quite ordinary people like "The Compleat Werewolf" by Anthony Boucher.

That's why I eagerly started to read "The Waters Under the Earth" but I'm sorry to say it was a complete disappointment. Same goes for "Parapsyche." Both stories had an exciting topic, they were not too far-fetched, but the style was horrible. Especially the latter which was written in a style that reminded me of 5th grade reading books. The characters are shallow and unconvincing and both stories seemed to have undergone a drastic revision to make them a) readable to 12-year-olds, b) short enough to be crammed into your magazine.

Your short stories are much better. Please, if you are unable to get the very best "complete novels" for the magazine, leave them out and confine yourself to good short stories.

K. Prange

Laan van Meerder voort

The Hague, Holland

● *O.K., teacher, should we go stand in the corner? Seriously, if you prefer fantasy to s-f, why not try our sister publication, Fantastic? Guaranteed goose-pimples.*

Dear Editor:

I think it would be a good idea to devote one edition a year to stories by your readers. It would draw more readers than an ordinary edition. After reading science fiction for a long time some of your readers may have some good ideas for stories. Something like this would prove to be very rewarding.

Albert Milano

199 Norwood Ave.

Brooklyn 8, N. Y.

● *Only one edition? Why, Al, our pages are always open to good stories, whether written by our readers or not. You send 'em in; if they're good enough, we'll buy 'em.*

Dear Editor:

Stories such as "Jason's Secret" by Rog Phillips convey a message of importance to all of us as to the many things that we are liable to run into when we actually conquer space. As for overcoming these as yet unforeseen obstacles it may be as easy or easier to by-pass

them as was being done in this story; but there are two sides to every story and what we think of as strange, bizarre, and even miraculous may be commonplace on one or more of these distant planets.

Arguments have been going on for a very long time between science and religion heads as to whether there is, was or will be a God, or for further proof one way or another about His very existence. Somewhere on one of these planets if we ever reach them, we will find all the proof we need to convince even the most ardent atheist or non-believer in creation.

"Jason's Secret" need not be anything spectacular as far as being different goes but for this story it was spectacular enough. It can be interpreted into as many meanings as there are grains of sand on a beach. But the main one seems to command attention to dimensions, and as such could draw criticism from all kinds of people. This, it seems to me, is the only fault. Other than this I believe it is an excellent story that should delight both the fan and the skeptic.

John P. Redden
1901 Lynch St.
St. Louis 18, Mo.

● *Let's hope that travel in outer space will be motivated by such things as the search for the meaning of Creation and the purpose of Life.*

Dear Editor:

Some of your recent novels in *Amazing* have been great. "Waters Under the Earth" and "Gold in the Sky" are two of the best science fiction novels I have seen printed anywhere.

I have been a science fiction fan for five or six years and never have been disappointed in any of the novels and short stories I've read.

I enjoy science fiction because it shows the product of honest imagination and serious thinking. It also proves itself to some people who willingly disbelieve the face value of all the modern advances man has made because it has been proven time and time again that the key to the foundation of civilization has been man's imagination.

Susan Shepard
Walhalla, North Dakota

● *Right you are, Sue; and one of the functions of science-fiction magazines is to keep stimulating that imagination to the highest possible pitch.*

AMAZING
STORIES

SCIENCE FICTION NOVEL

THE BIG COUNT-DOWN

By

CHARLES ERIC MAINE

ILLUSTRATOR

NOVICK

BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE



Russ swung the ax at George Earl with



unprecedented viciousness.

THE long count-down began at precisely twelve noon on January 18th. Strict radio silence was observed. MacClennon at the eastern peninsula of the island threw the master switch that started the giant Agnes reactor. In the technical control room Miss Kinley synchronized the slave clocks. Beyond the lagoon, the slender gleaming nose of the rocket projected from the steel lattice of the service gantry. It was a hot still day. The barometer was high. Conditions were right.

Russell Farrant packed his photographic equipment into the jeep and drove to the hill south of the lagoon.

He picked the 16-millimetre camera for this job. The scene trembled in the heat, and that would register on the color film, but it couldn't be helped. There was little enough color to register if one discounted the intense blue of the lagoon and the sky, but in seventy-two hours color might be very important.

He adjusted the focus and range on the lens mounting and took four longshots, then swung the telephoto lens into place and made a slow panning shot that took in the entire panorama. Kaluiki atoll at zero minus seventy-two. As yet Kaluiki was a meaningless word, though in three days it might be destined to take its place in the vocabulary of mankind.

He completed the panning shot. Stills were next on the program. For a few minutes he busied himself with a press camera and a color film pack and then trundled down the hill track in the jeep. Hell, he thought, at last I'm earning my salary.

The general had said, "We selected you for this assignment, Farrant, because we consider you to be the most competent journalist-cum-photographer in the western hemisphere today."

Farrant grinned wryly to himself. A man does his job, he thought, in the way he's accustomed to do it. The history of the Kaluiki project would be the Russ Farrant view of things supplemented by color films and audio tapes—an objective appraisal of events in time and space. All of them here, on Kaluiki: Strang, Hoevler, Earl, MacClennon, Youd, and the two women, Kay Kinley and Hilde Bartok. They *were* the Kaluiki project. Without them there would be no Agnes reactor and no test projectile, and no official observer toting cameras in tropical heat, sweating from day to day on canned food and whiskey.

He completed the scheduled midshots and he suddenly felt hungry and thirsty.

There were half a dozen people in the canteen, including Frieberg and Gant. Strang was eating stew. The others had reached the whiskey and brandy stage. George Earl was blandly smoking a pipe. Farrant made his way towards the hot plate. As he reached it Miss Kinley, looking outrageously cool in a white overall, materialized from the left.

"Hello, Russ," she said. "They've got you working at last?"

He nodded.

"You like M and V?"

"I'd prefer it iced."

"It's better hot. Makes you cooler quicker."

She served him and followed him across to a corner table.

"Anything new?" he inquired.

"Should there be? The countdown is two hours old."

"Agnes okay?"

"MacClennon is still over there. According to the figures everything is dead on prediction."

She had been studying him. "What's the trouble, Russ? Excitement getting you down?"

"Maybe after three months I'm getting impatient. Once I get the feel of the camera I hate to let up."

"Once the Navy boys have left the pace will increase."

"When will that be?"

"Zero minus sixty-nine."

He performed the inevitable computation. "Three o'clock. And then . . . ?"

"And then it's all ours. No contact with the rest of the world until after zero."

"Maybe not even then . . ."

She shrugged, and extinguished her cigarette in the ash tray. "It's a calculated risk." Then, inconsequently: "Ice cream?"

He shook his head. "Just coffee."

As he lit a cigarette, Lieutenant Frieberg appeared and flopped heavily into the vacated chair. His pink, boyish face and blond wavy hair seemed insolently glamorous in the austere environment of the canteen, and his immaculate white uniform was slightly ostentatious. He was smoking a cigar with an irritating blasé air.

"Hi, Farrant," Frieberg pronounced affably. "Just the man I wanted to see. Figured you'd want to get the Navy into your technicolor epic, just to keep the record straight. Way I see it you can shoot the take-off in the helicopter, but naturally we could use some close-ups."

"Why not," Farrant agreed reluctantly.

Frieberg glanced at his gold

wristwatch. "And there's time for a tape interview, too. I guess there are plenty of questions you could ask."

"What's the time?" Farrant asked.

"Fourteen-eight. Maybe you could work Sergeant Gant into the act, too?"

"Probably," said Farrant.

"We've had a great deal of liaison with you boys," Frieberg went on loquaciously. "And girls," he added, glancing at Miss Kinley who was returning from the range with two coffees.

"As soon as I've finished my coffee I'll fix you up," Farrant said.

Frieberg stood up. "How about the airstrip, in half an hour?"

"I'll be there," Farrant replied.

The helicopter was the last physical link with the naval units stationed securitywise around the Kaluiki proving zone. The last ship had pulled out more than a week ago. Lieutenant Frieberg's principal mission was to act as an airborne despatch rider between the operational headquarters on the aircraft carrier and Guy Strang, the man in charge of the Kaluiki group. Instructions and reports from one HQ to the other were conveyed on paper in a flat steel case with a double lock. Strang himself did the cypher work, using one of the new electronic machines which created a new code for each letter of the message. The final word of command had been delivered by Frieberg earlier that morning, a brief message ordering the start of the count-down. It also signalled the end of further communication between the island and the outside world. There would be only one break scheduled in the signal black-out: at zero minus sixty

minutes the television transmitter would be switched on so that the cameras could send scrambled pictures of the launching to special monitor equipment on the carrier.

Farrant carried his cameras and the portable tape recorder over to the airstrip. He took pictures of Frieberg and his sergeant against the background of the helicopter, and recorded an interview in the eastern sky, he joined the others who had come to watch Frieberg's 'copter take off.

"When are they due back?" Farrant asked.

"As soon as we break radio silence—after zero," said Strang. "The whole damn island will be swarming with naval and government types—a full scale invasion."

Farrant hoped they would be alive to welcome the invaders when the time came.

Guy Strang was a compact man, a little short and a little overweight, but wiry enough beneath the loose khaki-drill shirt he wore. His black hair and dark eyes gave him a sullen appearance, but his mouth was straight and thin, as if his lips were kept permanently compressed. During his forty-five years of life he had collected a string of letters after his name large enough to form a new alphabet, but he rarely used them, and his business card stated bluntly: *Guy R. Strang, Physicist*. The term physicist was an understatement, to say the least, for Strang had been in the nuclear research game long before they exploded the first A-bomb in the Nevada desert. The Agnes reactor, and, indeed, the entire Agnes project, was largely his baby. The other members of the team had made their own specialist contributions, but

the co-ordinating concept was his own.

Agnes was a code word, of course, and it stood for Anti-Gravity Nuclear Energy Supply—that was the function of the reactor. Outside the eight members of the team probably not more than a handful of people in the Western Hemisphere knew what was going on.

The need for absolute secrecy was justified. Ever since that alarming day during International Geophysical Year when the Russians had launched the first Sputnik into satellite orbit round the earth, and the Americans had realized that they were second in the space race, Washington pulled out all the stops in an effort to close the gap. And although the British government blandly professed to have no interest in space rockets outside the military missile field, British scientists were, in fact, investigating many of the fundamental theoretical problems of flight in space. Anglo-U. S. liaison on this level continued fruitfully for several years until, quite suddenly, the Agnes project was born. If it succeeded, the orthodox techniques of rocket propulsion would promptly become obsolete. Agnes symbolized a twenty-year lead over all comers on the long trail into space—if it worked . . .

Strang watched his instruments with a quiet absorbed interest. Here, in this room, was the weakest link in the chain: if the reactor behaved as predicted and delivered every single erg of the ten billion megawatts of required power to the launching equipment, then the space race would be won, and a rocket—an ordinary unremarkable rocket, but carrying electronic apparatus instead of fuel—would

accelerate slowly towards infinity, always gaining speed, to the speed of light, and perhaps beyond . . .

Soon after five o'clock Farrant arrived to take more pictures. He rigged up the photofloods to illuminate the instrumentation for color, and exposed about a hundred feet of film, taking in Strang, McClennon and Hilde Bartok. When he had finished he went over to the girl. He looked her over casually. Almost blonde, and almost pretty, with clear blue eyes behind the horn-rimmed glasses. Thirty-five, maybe—possibly less. A Hungarian—until the war cut across her schooldays and sent her bustling with her family to the New World. Now an acknowledged electronics expert.

She glanced up.

"I understand you're doing the early night watch," he said.

"Until midnight, then Mac takes over. It's six on and six off."

"Anything worth recording to-night?"

She referred to a green folder. "Zero minus sixty-two—that's at ten o'clock—reactor banks two and four open up to level two. If you go up to the catwalk you'll be able to film the dampers as they come out."

He left Hilda and went over to Guy Strang.

"When you're not busy I'd like to talk to you, Guy."

"What about?"

"There are certain aspects of the project that I need to know in more detail—that is, if I'm to do an intelligent commentary."

"Talk to Hoevler, or Miss Kinley. They know most of the answers."

"I want to be able to quote you—maybe record an interview. As head of the team . . ."

Strang said brusquely, "Tomorrow, perhaps, if we can synchronize our lunch breaks."

"Thanks. I'll be there."

He made his way out of the reactor building. Absently he drove the jeep around the lagoon towards the group of huts clustered about half a mile from the launching pad. He parked outside the entrance to a long asbestos sheet and wood frame building bearing the sign *Ballistics—Technical Services*.

He sauntered along a bare corridor to a door on which a white plaque announced: *Computer and Radar Section—Miss K. Kinley*.

There were two people in the room, Kay Kinley and George Earl, the Security Officer. They turned round as he entered. Kay made a welcoming smile, "No cameras this time?"

"I'm after information. Hope I'm not breaking in on something . . ."

"As a matter of fact, you are," Earl murmured in a furred voice that sounded sleepier than usual. "But you might as well join in the fun."

"What fun?"

Kay indicated one of the radar screens, circular, about fifteen inches across, with a pale green line scanning radially like the hand of a stopwatch. An identifiable pattern of light spread behind a calibration grating indicated the shape of Kaluiki Island. The lagoon was a dark circle, and the huts and buildings formed precise bright blobs around its fringe. She moved a milled knob and the pattern seemed to shift upwards, but the lagoon was still visible at the top of the screen.

"Just here," she said, pointing with an elegant fingernail to a

brilliant speck shining among an area of featureless mottling.

"What is it?" Farrant asked.

"That's the big mystery, Russ. I don't ever remember seeing it before now."

"Well, what *might* it be?"

"Almost certainly a metallic object—large, to have such a strong echo."

"There's plenty of metal on the island."

"That's not the point, Russ. The echo is coming from a point about four miles south of the lagoon."

"That would be on the hill . . ."

"Beyond it—on the far slope. There's no equipment of any kind in that area, nothing that could give an echo."

"How about a vein of metal in the rock strata—iron ore, even gold?"

Earl said quietly and a little contemptuously: "There's no gold in them thar hills, Russ. And there's no rock strata."

"So what do *you* make of it?"

Earl shrugged. "No ideas at all. But I intend to find out. We can use the jeep."

Farrant glanced at his watch. "It'll be dark inside the half-hour."

"We can use torches."

"Wouldn't it be better to leave it until tomorrow?"

Earl sighed passively. "You don't imagine I fancy traipsing two or three miles through semi-jungle with a torch. But suppose—just suppose—that in some way the Ruskis managed to land an intercontinental missile with a H-bomb warhead on this island. Suppose the H-bomb has a time clock."

"In that case oughtn't we to report to Operation HQ on the carrier?"

"And break radio silence? Anyway, it's all supposition, but we

can't take a chance on it—we have to do some night exploring."

"Okay," Farrant said. "I'll come with you."

Earl sucked at his pipe, found it dead and relit it. "Can you get hold of torches and batteries? And a spade?"

"A spade?"

"Better bring two, and a pickaxe. We may have to do some deep digging. Oh, and you may need your cameras. Meanwhile I'll organize a flask of coffee and some sandwiches. And I'll pick up my revolver while I'm about it."

"You mean . . ."

"I don't mean anything, old son, but I'm security dog, and the gun is my canine teeth. Be back here, in about half an hour. We'll take our final briefing from Kay on the exact position of—of the big mystery."

CHAPTER 2

GEORGE EARL was around forty, Farrant estimated. Most of his career had been spent in uniform, and Farrant understood that he had until lately been a captain in the Military Police. He gave the impression of inherent lassitude, but the appearance was deceptive for, when the situation warranted it, Earl could put on an impressive display of relentlessly applied energy.

They left the jeep at the top of the track on the northern flank of the hill, and advanced due south through the clumps of brush and stunted trees that adorned the summit like a gigantic wig. It wasn't dense enough to be jungle, but the straggling vegetation concealing occasional creepers impeded their progress. The moon was in its first quarter, casting no

more than a pallid ghostly glow which did little to illuminate their path.

Upon the southern slopes of the hill, the trees and vegetation thinned out into coarse clumps of needle-like grass, and presently they were on bare volcanic rock once more. The landscape looked perfectly normal.

Earl called a halt. Squatting on the dusty ground they sipped hot coffee from the flask and smoked cigarettes.

"We've come too far," Earl pronounced. "We probably passed the point about half a mile back—on the left, if this map is accurate."

"What do you expect to see?" Farrant asked.

"How should I know?"

"Then how do you know what to look for?"

"I don't, old son."

"That's what I mean," Farrant pointed out. "The whole business is so vague. You said it could have been a radar fault, so wouldn't it have been a good idea to check the radar first?"

"You think Kay wouldn't know if the radar were faulty?" said Earl with some acidity. "You don't give her credit for much intelligence."

"I give her credit for a damn sight more than intelligence," Farrant retorted, wondering why it was that the other man's silky voice always seemed to get under his skin. It wasn't even what he said so much as how he said it.

"Well, now, we all do that, but we don't brag about it," Earl came back. Farrant felt his temper surging, but held on to it grimly.

"I'm not bragging about anything," he stated in a voice that was just a little too deliberately calm. "I'm just trying to be logical

about this business. We ought to have made sure there wasn't a simple explanation first before chasing about in the dark . . ."

"Then keep your shirt on, old son. You can't be logical if you keep getting in a tizzy whenever I happen to mention Kay. Anyone would think you were stuck on her. Or maybe you are?"

"Maybe you ought to mind your own damn business," Farrant said hotly, resisting an urge to bunch his fist and lash out at the other man's suave expressionless face.

Earl said gently: "Now let's not get aggressive. If I'd thought you were going to get nasty like this I'd have come alone, or asked Hoevler—he's not so sensitive as you."

Farrant stood up, and was shocked to find himself trembling in his arms and legs. I must keep control, he told himself.

He bent down to pick up his pack. "Let's get out of here."

Earl retrieved the other pack with the pickaxe, and led the way back into the brush. "I suggest we split up and go our separate ways. We can cover twice as much ground."

They moved off into the night. Farrant followed the bobbing luminous circle of light cast by the torch. Glancing briefly at his watch he saw that the time was already well after nine, and that meant he would have to abandon part of his filming schedule. Authority would be likely to frown on that. His job was recording the count-down, not pursuing a phantom radar trace through tropical scrub.

Think, he ordered himself. A large mass of metal embedded in soil and rock that was once part of the ocean bed. What could it be and how did it get there. Unless . . .

A picture floated hazily into his mind, a blurred and ill-defined picture, sharpening and brightening as if someone were focusing a projector on the backdrop of his consciousness. A ship filled the center of the picture—a rusted and barnacle encrusted hulk lying still and silent in the green twilight of the deep ocean. Fishes glided dreamlike through derelict hatches. Then, abruptly, the ocean floor rose up in a gigantic upheaval, and, incredibly, there was leaping incandescent fire beneath the dark green water, and the scene dissolved in an inferno of boiling chaos. Later, an eternity later, the chaos subsided and he was looking across a calm ocean to a new island from which smoke and steam still drifted hazily upwards towards the burning sun.

The picture faded, but now he knew the answer to the mystery of the radar echo. Somewhere on this plateau, buried beneath the trees and shrubs, were the remains of an ancient iron hulk that had once been a ship. A large metal object, Kay had said. Well, it had been there all the time, but she hadn't noticed it before—probably hadn't had cause to notice it. You can live with something for day after day without seeing it until, abruptly, wham!—there it is right before your eyes.

"A hulk!" he said. "A stupid rusted old wreck of an iron hulk!"

He retraced his steps, shouting George Earl's name.

Earl was hostile to Farrant's dream. "That's the craziest idea I've ever heard in my life. A ship on top of a hill!" He laughed.

It was the laugh—short, contemptuous, that infuriated Farrant most. He struck at the other man with a swinging right and had the

satisfaction of feeling his knuckles bore into the side of Earl's face. Earl swayed backwards but managed to recover his balance with a frantic flailing of his arms.

Farrant stood tensed and angry, watching closely as his opponent recovered his composure, ready to strike again if necessary. But once again Earl stole command of the situation. His hand moved slowly, almost casually, to his pocket, and in a moment he was holding a long-barrelled Service revolver. He took a step nearer.

In an instant of appalled insight Farrant saw everything as it really was, objectively, like a frozen moment from eternity. "George," he gasped, "this is insane. What's gotten into us, acting like this?"

Earl's voice was small and cold. "What's gotten into us is that we've taken the masks off for the first time, Russ. And we don't like what we see behind the masks. Now I swear to God I'll kill you at the slightest provocation and I'll drag your body to the jeep and I'll dump you in the Pacific."

"I believe you would," Farrant breathed. The moment of insight had gone; he was tensed and cautious again, unafraid of Earl himself, but fearful of the gun and the steadiness of the hand holding it.

"All right," said Earl carefully. "I owe you a sock in the puss, but I'll do it in my own time. Right now we've got work to do."

"Not me."

Earl replaced the revolver in his pocket. "You quitting?"

"It's not a matter of quitting. I've got duties of my own and they rate higher than chasing a buried hulk of scrap iron."

"Go to hell," said Earl shortly.

He turned his back and walked off into the darkness.

Still angry, and conscious that he had been humiliated, Farrant pushed his way along the trail that led back to the jeep. Well, at least he and Earl knew where they stood with each other now. The daggers were drawn, and the remaining days of the count-down would be an ordeal of hatred and strain. But it hadn't been so until the last few hours. George Earl and he had been affable friends, not talking overmuch, but well disposed towards each other. The poison had appeared suddenly, overpoweringly—and it was impossible to understand why.

I'll talk to him tomorrow, Farrant promised himself. When we've both had a sleep we'll feel differently.

"Russ!" He stopped, frozen. That was Earl's voice, staccato and urgent. "Russ—I've found it!"

Something cold and nameless rippled swiftly down Farrant's spine.

"Coming! Coming, George!"

Farrant began to run, then Earl was gripping his arm, shaking him, flashing the torch, shouting in his ear.

"Down there, Russ! Look!"

Farrant looked, and saw nothing remarkable. A fallen tree trunk, curiously splintered as if it had been crudely snapped across the middle, and a patch of rough lumpy ground, and beyond that a dense black shadow.

"Come forward," Earl commanded.

Farrant followed him, advancing on the shadow, but now it was more than a shadow. It was a crater, and more than that, a cavity, a tunnel some four feet across plunging at an oblique angle

straight into the ground. They came upon the lip of the hole. Earl shone his torch down into it, and the light reflected brilliantly from polished metal surfaces. The shape was difficult to discern: cylindrical and coned, with curved fins half buried in loose soil and rock. At its nearest point the metallic object was not more than six feet below the surface.

"What the hell . . ." Farrant exclaimed.

Earl spun around to face him. "Exactly! What the hell! You made yourself look pretty silly, didn't you, Russ? Hulk of a ship! My Aunt Fanny!"

"Okay, okay—let's skip the wit," Farrant said irritably.

But Earl was determined to savour his victory to the utmost. "The funniest ship I ever saw." He laughed loudly. "So why don't you apologize?"

Farrant's skin suddenly felt cold and damp. The pay-off was coming, here and now, inevitably.

"Maybe I underrated you, Russ. Maybe you knew all the time. You could have been trying to throw me off the scent, to cover up . . ."

"Cover up what?" Farrant demanded in exasperation.

"This! You did everything you could to throw this trip, to explain it away. You *knew* it was here all the time, but you didn't want me to find it!"

"You're mad," Farrant said tersely, and meant it. Earl had let security go to his brain. He was on the verge of a dangerous psychological breakdown.

The revolver had made its appearance again, but this time Earl's hand was trembling. Farrant took a step backwards, fumbling behind him with the straps holding the shovels.

"Who are you working for, Russ?" Earl persisted. "What's your purpose? Espionage or sabotage, or both?"

Farrant said quietly: "Pull yourself together, George. I'm not involved in any cloak and dagger stuff, believe me."

"Liar! I've been in Security a long time, and I know how to deal with traitors like you . . ."

Desperately Russ pulled at the securing straps on the pack. They gave way. The spades slipped, but he grasped one, allowing the other to fall to the ground, and in the same instant swung the weapon with one hand at the other man.

The revolver crashed. A fraction of a second later the steel blade of the spade caught Earl edgewise, cleaving his head down to the jawbone. Blood flowed in a dark rivulet.

A paralysis took possession of Farrant's mind. Like a robot he rocked the handle of the spade until it came loose, then flung it into the hole, where it clattered noisily against the metal thing down there. Using his own torch he found the second spade. Then, without knowing why, he began to shovel earth into the hole, ignoring Earl's body lying near the edge.

Presently he stopped as something twisted instinctively in his mind. "Of course," he whispered to himself. "The camera." He dropped the spade and hunted in his pack until he found the press camera and flash equipment. This was important, he felt convinced, but he didn't know why. He rigged up the flash-gun and adjusted the lens. Without plan or purpose he photographed the hole, realizing but not caring that of the strange metal object only the tip of one fin was now visible above the

loose earth. Then he took four shots of Earl's body from different angles. Evidence for the prosecution, he informed himself without feeling. I'm signing my own death warrant. But that wasn't strictly true. It had been self-defense. Earl had tried to shoot him, had made fantastic accusations . . .

He replaced the camera in the pack, then in the light of the torch saw Earl's revolver. He picked it up carefully and put it in the pack also. Then he resumed his digging.

When he had covered the metal object with earth and rock, and trampled it down, he pushed the inert body of George Earl into what remained of the cavity and covered it. Next he searched the ground carefully for anything that he might have overlooked.

Satisfied at last, he abandoned the site, and returned to where the jeep waited to take him back to the camp. He walked in a vacuum, a headache throbbed faintly. Tomorrow he could think, analyze; but tonight there was sleep . . .

Farrant awoke around six-thirty. The headache had become intolerable. He attributed it to the wearying effect of the previous night's long trek.

He lit the stove and put on a can of water and remembered George Earl. So much for George, he thought. He'll have to be a damn sight more convincing before he drags me on any more of these crazy excursions into the backwoods of Kaluiki. And I hope his headache is worse than mine!

He made the coffee black and hot, and as he drank it, he noticed the dried brown substance staining his hands and forearms. It could have been blood; but there was no sign of a cut or abrasion on his

arms. Very likely it was the sap from a shrub or tree. He continued washing, then shaved. The headache continued to beat savagely behind his eyes, making thinking difficult.

He put on clean clothes and then opened the canvas pack. He removed the contents, checking the cameras for signs of damage. All seemed well. Then, right at the bottom of the pack, he found the revolver.

He sat on the edge of the bunk, holding the gun. "What the hell am I doing with George's revolver?" he demanded suddenly.

Stubbornly he forced his aching brain to recall the events of the night, but there were only memories of the long toil across the plateau. With George? Of course. Who else?

I imagine he must have dropped the gun some place and I found it, he told himself. I'll return it later.

At eight o'clock he went over to the canteen and found himself the first arrival. He began preparing coffee.

Kay arrived ten minutes later, looking cool and fresh even though the morning temperature was already in the seventies. Not exactly a pretty girl, but personable—the kind a man would instinctively look at.

"Morning, Russ," she said. "Let me take over."

She concentrated on the pre-cooked breakfast while he stood watching her.

"You look wonderful this morning, Kay," he said.

She glanced archly at him. "Meaning I don't any other morning?"

"You know what I mean."

"I guess so," she said. "Find any H-missiles last night?"

He acknowledged the quick change of subject with laconic smile. "We drew a blank, but we worked out a neat theory that would explain the mystery of the radar trace."

He explained how a wrecked ship might conceivably have been lifted from the ocean bottom on the crest of a gigantic subaquean upheaval, to become embedded in the superstructure of a newly born volcanic island. Atolls were frequently appearing and disappearing. Nor was it impossible that the ship itself might have triggered off the volcanic eruption at the bottom of the ocean, if, for example, it had exploded violently after sinking—either the boilers, or perhaps ammunition in the hold. The shock wave might have opened up a fracture in the Pacific bedrock, setting up a chain reaction of volcanic eruption and earthquake, resulting in the birth of Kaluiki.

"Ingenious," she conceded, "and could be right. It wouldn't need to be a whole ship—just a sizeable piece of it. On the other hand, Russ, I hardly think this is a newly-born atoll. It's one of a permanent group."

"Newly-born is pretty flexible. In the past fifty years. Or for as long as they've been making ships of iron and steel."

"I suppose we could find out. The oceanographers gave this zone a thorough going over in view of the nature of the Agnes project. It could be dangerous to have geological flaws and latent volcanoes when you're about to take space and gravitation and give it a big twist."

"That reminds me, Kay. Strang suggested I should talk to you about the Agnes test. I'm after some background stuff. I have a

general idea of what goes on, but to write a coherent commentary I need to dig a little deeper."

"But why don't you try Hoevler? He's very good at expounding complex science in words of one syllable."

"I'll try Hoevler in due course, but I'd rather try you, even if it's only an excuse to talk to you for a while."

"Do you need an excuse to talk to me?"

"If I didn't I'd be a much happier man," he replied.

Strang and Miss Bartok came into the canteen at that moment, followed by Joseph Hoevler, the young-old man of the team. Farrant and Kay joined them for the first meal of the day.

CHAPTER 3

DOCTOR GRAHAM YOUND was a part-time medico. The seven remaining members of the Kaluiki team were undemanding in their clinical requirements. Dr. Yound had specialized to some extent in the medical applications of radioactive isotopes, so if he wasn't in his surgery, or in his billet, he would almost certainly be found in the reactor block.

That was where Farrant finally ran him down. Miss Bartok was there, too. Yound and the girl were chatting casually near the control desk. Looking at them from a distance you might have thought they were brother and sister; both were about the same height, with fair hair and round faces, complete with blue eyes and horn-rimmed glasses.

"Hello, Doc. Hello, Hilde," Farrant said.

The girl eyed him questioningly. "You didn't come last night."

"Sorry. I got dragged on a cross-country run instead."

"What was this—a clandestine date?" Youd inquired.

Farrant nodded. "With Agnes—she was having her dampers pushed in or pulled out, I'm not sure which."

"The smoke goes up the chimney just the same," Youd pointed out quite seriously.

"If you're interested, Russ," said Hilde, "we're pulling the banks one and three dampers at two o'clock. Fourteen hundred, or zero minus forty-six to be precise."

"I'll just have to make it this time, Hilde."

Youd asked, "What can I do for you, Russ?"

"Aspirins, I guess. I've got a stinking headache."

Youd surveyed Farrant with a professional air. "Where?" he demanded.

Farrant pointed to his temples. "Behind the eyes."

"When did it start?"

"Last night."

"What time?"

Farrant took time off to consider that one. "Oh, latish. Maybe around ten. I went exploring over the hill with George Earl."

"Last night? After dark?"

"We were just checking up on a buried ship."

"Were you out in the sun a great deal yesterday, Russ?"

"Maybe a couple of hours, filming longshots."

"Without a hat?"

Farrant shrugged. "I never wear a hat."

"You damn well should. Never take chances with the flaming sun. You made matters worse by all that late night exertion. How about George? Is he all right?"

"So far as I know, Doc."

"Well, you'd better come back to the surgery with me. I'll fix you up."

"Thanks."

In the surgery the doctor gave him a hypo that cleared the headache in fifteen seconds flat, then handed him a small glass tube of tablets.

"Take one every two hours. Don't forget, sunstroke rates as a self-inflicted injury."

"I'll remember," Farrant promised, but all the time he knew very well that it wasn't sunstroke at all. The headache had been as if someone had tampered with his brain.

Before picking up the day's work he returned to his billet and put Earl's service revolver in his pocket. Then he called at Earl's billet, but found the door locked. There was no response. Peering through the window he could see that the room was empty and that the bunk had been neatly made up.

Irritated, he patted the hard shape of the gun in his pocket, then made his way towards the Technical Services Section near the launching ramp on the other side of the lagoon.

From the window of the radar-computer room you could look out on the clear blue water of the lagoon. Farrant and Kay stood staring dreamily at the scene. It was eleven o'clock, and somewhere behind them in the room a computer whirled and clicked like a chirpy cricket.

"As soon as this count-down is over, I'll be in there—cooling off," Kay murmured drowsily.

"Me, too," Farrant agreed.

She turned to him and put her hands on his shoulders. "Let's get down to business, Russ."

Farrant found her nearness quite unsettling. It was getting to be more and more so every time he saw this woman, and her image in his mind was taking on the persistent quality of an obsession. I must remain objective about her, he told himself. She treats everyone the same, with the same friendly candor, on a non-differential basis.

Aware that his heart was beating uncomfortably, he walked away from her and sat on the corner of a glass-topped table on one side of the room. He lit a cigarette, inhaling slowly and deliberately while he suppressed the frustrated fluttering of his emotions.

"About the rocket, and about the reactor," he said.

She came over to him and sat on a tube and canvas chair.

"I know in general terms that the energy from the reactor will be used to set up a kind of force field in which the rocket will lose weight and take off," he went on. "But I don't understand how or why."

"To explain exactly how or why would take several large sheets of advanced maths," she said, smiling. "It starts with a laboratory phenomenon called nuclear magnetic resonance. An atom at the point of focus of an intense oscillating magnetic field will absorb energy when the frequency of oscillation resonates with the orbital period of the electrons."

"Could we have that in English, please?"

"That's about as English as you can get it, Russ. I still think you ought to see Hoever."

"Carry on. I'm listening."

"Well, what Strang did was to substitute electrostatic force for electromagnetic. A curious thing

happened. The atoms under test disappeared."

"How could he possibly know that, atoms being so small?"

"There are ways of measuring on a statistical basis. In fact, they hadn't disappeared at all. They'd simply lost all cohesion with surrounding atoms outside the force field. They'd dropped out of play, as it were."

He drew deeply on his cigarette. "Is that important?"

"More important than you realize, Russ. Strang knew that something queer was happening. There's a parallel between the force that binds atoms into molecules and the force of gravity that binds planets and stars into galactic systems. He realized that to get anywhere at all he would need dollars galore and all kinds of laboratory facilities. So he put the matter to the government. It was a long chance, but they took it. The President himself authorized the okay."

"So that was the start of the anti-gravity research?"

"And the start of the Agnes project. Strang spent years working on his gimmick. What he discovered was this—that if you can create a powerful enough electrostatic field, using billions and billions of volts, something in the space in that field twists and becomes distorted, and at the same time absorbs an immense amount of electrical power. But once you've established the twist, you can keep it going indefinitely with very little power, because you've overcome the inertia."

Farrant stood up and started to walk round. "I'm beginning to get something out of it," he said thoughtfully. "At least, something is adding up. This business of

twisting space—doesn't that connect in some way with Einstein?"

"Yes, it does. Einstein showed us that space is curved in the neighborhood of a gravitational field. He proved it by astronomical experiment."

"Wasn't that when he bent the light from a star as it passed near to the sun?"

"Einstein didn't do the bending. He merely observed it. But the light was bent, because the space around the sun is curved. Now, what Strang did in effect was to twist a piece of space so that the curvature ran the opposite way. You can guess what happened. Can't you?"

Farrant considered. "He cancelled out the gravity."

"No. He reversed it. It's simple enough, Russ. Space curvature shows the presence of a gravitational field. The stronger the field, the greater the curvature. But if you bend space the other way, you create conditions of negative gravity."

"I see," he murmured doubtfully, pondering the concept.

"And that's all there is to it," Kay went on. "The Agnes reactor is building up slowly to a peak of power which, at operational zero, will be delivered in one lump to the energy converters which feed the electrostatic resonators on the launching pad. The rocket is in the dielectric center—that is to say, it will be in the middle of the piece of space that's going to be twisted. Once the twist has occurred, the reactor can close down, and the field is maintained by the low power equipment in the rocket. Using radioactive batteries with solar charging, the rocket should keep on travelling more or less indefinitely through space—at least until the

batteries get too low to maintain the field, and the twist untwists."

"What happens then?"

"Nothing much. The rocket will simply respond to the most powerful natural gravitational force in the vicinity, and probably crash land."

"Mmm," he grunted, still pacing the floor. "There was talk of fantastic speeds—approaching light, for instance."

"Why not? Negative gravity will have the same characteristics as ordinary positive gravity, and an acceleration constant. Here on Earth a falling body accelerates at thirty-two feet per second every second, and keeps on accelerating. If it could keep falling long enough it would eventually attain the speed of light. The same principle applies to negative gravity."

"At what acceleration?"

"We're not sure. Strang estimates a field acceleration constant of about ten feet per second squared, but it might be much greater. It depends on just how much twist Agnes can put into the space around the rocket. And there you have most of the story. But I still think you ought to see Hoevler if you want to understand it properly."

"You did fine, Kay."

"The bit about inertia clicked with me. I've got a barrier of my own that I've been trying to break through for some time."

"So why don't you try?" she said quietly.

"Because I'm not sure whether it will stay broken with little effort."

She drew nearer. "How will you ever know, Russ, unless you try the experiment?"

He kissed her. She didn't resist, accepting the kiss with a leisurely

response. And when he broke away she put her lips to his again.

She whispered: "I've been wanting you to do that for longer than I can remember."

"Do you think we can maintain the twist, Kay?"

She smiled. "It isn't a twist at all, Russ. It's the most straightforward and natural thing in the world."

Farrant squatted on the hard metal of the platform, while Hoevler hovered over him, arms still clamped on his hips.

"Launching a rocket is like driving a car up a hill. You've got to beat the gradient, and that takes power and plenty of gasoline. But let's have a road made of rubber, and let's have a gadget that can grip the road from underneath and pull it down so that you get a dip in the slope of the hill. See what I'm getting at?"

"I think so."

"Okay, Russ. You can move this dip up and down the hill as you wish. Naturally you start at the bottom, with the downward slope of the dip under the wheels of the car. You release the handbrake. What happens? The car tries to roll forward into the hollow of the dip. Get it?"

"So far."

"But you box clever. You slide the dip up the hill, but all the time the car is rolling on a down gradient. You climb the hill by rolling down the side of an artificial dip. Dead crafty, isn't it?"

Hoevler continued: "The car doesn't need any gasoline, but you can't make a kink in a road just by spitting on it. You've got to have power, and that means *power*. Once you've made the kink there's no problem. It stays put with just

a little pulling. You might almost say the weight of the car keeps it there. Does that make sense to you?"

Farrant stood up, satisfied. The Agnes project had been accurately defined in cartoon terms, and he understood it at last. Whether it was a feasible proposition or not he didn't feel qualified to decide. Hoevler seemed skeptical, but Hoevler was always skeptical, and it didn't mean a thing. His mask of cynicism was in the nature of a defense mechanism.

"Thanks a lot," Farrant said. "You've cleared the air tremendously. One thing, though—if you have no faith in this project, why do you work on it?"

Hoevler scratched the seat of his pants with profound exasperation. "Why does anyone work on anything? I need the money, damn it, but that's it."

That wasn't true either, Farrant thought. Hoevler liked the job, and he had faith, too. But a team of bulldozers would never drag the truth from him.

"I'll be back later with the cine tackle," he said. "I'll try not to disturb you."

During the afternoon, Farrant, increasingly conscious of the weight of the gun in his pocket, made a special effort to seek out George Earl. The billet was still locked.

The three large huts comprising the general purpose stores were locked and deserted.

He did not venture beyond the blast wall, but satisfied himself that George Earl was not to be seen. He circled the general stores huts, but they too were locked. Perhaps Earl had spent the day exploring the hill in search of the

buried remains of a long sunken ship. Anything seemed possible.

At dinner, Earl was still absent, and the others were beginning to comment on it. Strang in particular revealed his annoyance. "I like to know where the members of my staff are at any moment of the day," he stated flatly to Farrant. "And that applies to Earl more than anyone else. The Security Officer should be available to anyone, anywhere, at any time."

Farrant explained about the mysterious radar echo, and suggested that Earl might still be pursuing its source. He mentioned the theory of the rusted hulk.

"I don't care. He is required to report his movements. The moment you see him, tell him to report to me."

"I'll do that, Guy."

A few minutes later Kay entered the canteen, and he lost no time in joining her. For a tense instant he was afraid to meet her steady eyes, but when he did they were warm and welcoming. Quietly he said: "Hello, wonderful one. Let's get together this evening. Let's talk, and talk—and talk."

"Fine, but I'm on duty until nine."

"Okay—after nine."

"It's a date," she said.

Farrant abandoned filming for the rest of the day. He had no fixed schedule to work to, and his terms of reference were flexible enough and largely left to his own discretion. He took a shower, but the water from the tank on the high trellis tower had been warmed by the sun and was unrefreshing. Back in his billet he shaved carefully. In the mirror he sized up his reflection. A lean character, this Russell Farrant, almost gaunt. What the hell could a woman like

Kay see in him, or did she see him differently from what he was? And, for that matter, did he see her differently from what she was. Mentally he re-enacted the meetings they'd had. Smooth, very smooth. It might almost have been rehearsed. You took things at their face value, but was that the true value? Of course! My instinct about her is right: she's on the level, and I'm being a heel to even think in those terms.

The time was eight-forty-five. Restlessly, he went outside. The night was cooling, but the air still retained a residual warmth.

He returned to the billet. It was three minutes past nine. A sullen cloud began to depress his mind. It wasn't a deadline, but the impatience remained.

At nine-thirty he walked over to Kay's billet, only to find it locked and in darkness. Moodily he retraced his steps to his own quarters, and there, magically, was Kay.

He took her in his arms and kissed her, but to his astonishment she pushed him away. For the first time he noticed signs of pale strain in her face.

"Russ," she said, and her voice was harsh and ghostly, "Russ, I didn't mean to be late, but something terrible has happened."

For no reason that he could define the image of George Earl's languid features flashed through his mind.

"There's been a murder," she said. "Tonight, here, on Kaluiki." "Who?" he asked starkly.

"Somebody strangled Hilde Bartok," she said. Russ was silent for a moment, whether from surprise or shock or both, he wasn't sure. Finally he asked Kay for some details.

"THERE will have to be a formal post mortem," Strang announced, "and because of the climate it cannot be long delayed. So, under the circumstances, Dr. Youd—if you have no objections . . ."

Youd shrugged helplessly—"the situation being what it is . . ."

"Tonight, then, if you can arrange it."

Youd nodded reluctantly.

The entire staff of the Kaluiki project, with the notable exception of George Earl and Miss Bartok, were assembled in the reactor room. Strang had summoned the five remaining members of the expedition to an immediate summary investigation at the site of the killing, and Dr. Youd, after examining the body, had pronounced the cause of death as manual strangulation.

Strang said: "I have called you all here, together, in this room, because one thing is only too clear. If Miss Bartok was, in fact, deliberately murdered, then the murderer must be one of us."

Farrant pointed out, "George Earl still hasn't put in an appearance."

Strang frowned impatiently. "Has any of you seen him at all today?"

Silence.

"Farrant, I believe you told me he returned to the hill to investigate some matter of a spurious radar echo."

"That was a guess," Farrant said. "I went with him last night, but we found nothing. I figured that maybe he went back this morning."

"Did Earl take the jeep?"

"Well, no . . ."

"Which means he climbed the hill on foot, and has remained on foot all day. That sounds improbable. Did he return to the canteen for meals?"

"Not to my knowledge."

"So he must have taken food and drink with him. Did anyone see Earl in the canteen this morning taking provisions?"

A subdued negative murmur.

"So presumably he left early, assuming that he came back last night. You told me he came back with you, Farrant."

"That's right."

Hoevler said: "Maybe he's hiding out. Could be he planned to kill Hilde. God knows why, but could be."

"Anything could be," Strang said. "Earl is a suspect too, and until we find him we can't make much progress. Farrant—first thing in the morning I'd like you to search the hill. Look for any clue that might help to locate the man. But don't waste time—you may be wanted for other duties during the last few hours of the count-down."

"Okay," said Farrant.

"Meanwhile I want to talk with each of you in turn, alone. I have to go through the formality of asking questions and taking statements. And I think we might start with Miss Kinley, to relieve her of the strain of waiting. Is that all right with you?" he asked.

"Very well," said Kay quietly.

Strang glanced at the sheeted body. "I think—this—had better be removed to the surgery, if two of you would be so kind . . ."

Farrant and MacClennon stepped forward.

After several fumbling attempts, Farrant and MacClennon obtained a secure grip on the body

of Hilde Bartok and carried it to the surgery of Dr. Youd.

They helped Youd to strip the body and prepare it for the autopsy. Then they left.

For a long time in the warm darkness they said nothing, until MacClennon abruptly broke the silence. "It's all very well for Strang to play at being a detective inspector, Russ, but who's going to question *him*?"

Farrant eyed his companion curiously, but in the dark he could not clearly distinguish the expression on his face.

"Meaning what?" he asked.

"Meaning that he's going to question us all as possible suspects—but who's going to question *him*? Or doesn't he class as a suspect?"

"Candidly, I can't visualize any of us as suspects. I know I didn't do it. Kay couldn't have. Nor you, because Hilde was your colleague. Hoevler's not the type. Doc Youd—well, that's just fantastic. Same applies to Strang . . ."

"Strang was always in and out of the reactor room. Always talking to Hilde. More than in the strict line of business, I thought."

"He's so wrapped up in his work."

"Work hard, play hard. I know a thing or two, Russ. I know Strang has been to Hilde's quarters at night."

"So what? Why should that make him want to kill her?"

"Why shouldn't he be questioned, too? That's all I'm asking."

"That's fair. But who's going to do the questioning?"

"It should have been a public inquiry—everyone present, asking anyone whatever seems relevant."

"You're right, Mac. We can put it to Strang. He's a rational man, and I can't see him refusing."

"I'll put it to him," MacClennon stated. "I'll demand an open free-for-all inquiry tomorrow morning after we know the result of the Doc's post-mortem."

Farrant said: "There's still the question of George Earl. Seems to me he could be suspect number one. Or don't you think so?"

"Russ, it wouldn't surprise me to learn that Earl is dead, too—and he's dead because Hilde's dead, or the other way round. If Earl is dead, then there's a killer among those who are left, and it could just as well be Strang as anyone of the rest of us."

"Yes, I suppose you're right," Farrant murmured thoughtfully.

Kay came out of the reactor building. Farrant took her to one side. "Look, honey," he said, "stay in your quarters and I'll be with you just as soon as I can."

She eyed him vaguely. "All right, Russ. I'll wait for you."

"Well, any developments—with Strang, I mean?"

"No, except that he asked me a great many questions about you, Russ, and George Earl, as if . . ."

"As if what?"

"I don't know . . ."

He gripped Kay's arm. "See you later, honey. Don't worry about a thing."

MacClennon was waiting patiently by the control console, smoking a cigarette.

He said nothing, and Farrant was forced to make conversation. He said: "Look, Mac—if you don't mind—I'd like to see Strang next, as soon as he's finished with Hoevler."

"You in a hurry?"

"There's something I have to say to him while I'm in the mood."

MacClennon's eyes became speculative. "About you and Earl?"

"Yes. He's been asking Kay questions."

"You can do your explaining first if it suits you better."

"Explaining?"

"About Earl. That's what you meant, wasn't it?"

"If Strang is curious then I'm the one to satisfy his curiosity."

"All the same, looking at it from Strang's point of view, you went off with Earl last night and he hasn't been seen since."

"What are you trying to imply, Mac," Farrant said coldly.

"Nothing at all. It's just that you were the last to see him alive."

Farrant puffed at his cigarette. "How come you're so damn sure he's dead?"

"I'm not sure at all, but it isn't like George Earl to disappear for a whole day without saying a word to anyone. Let's be fair. Alive or dead Earl's missing, and it's reasonable Strang should ask questions."

"Okay, okay," Farrant said irascibly. "Only let him ask me the questions."

"Kay's a suspect, like all of us," MacClennon said shortly.

Hoevler came out of the ante-room a few minutes later, massively stroking his red beard. "Bloody business," he remarked to no one in particular. "Told him he ought to cancel the count-down and call in Security. He nearly blew his top. Who's next? Sherlock Strang is waiting."

Farrant went in. Strang was standing near the shuttered window of the ante-room, his face darkly sour and brooding. He gestured towards a chair, but Farrant remained standing, still smoking his cigarette.

"We're getting nowhere fast," Strang said curtly. "So far there is

nothing at all to show who could have killed Miss Bartok."

He paused for a moment, surveying Farrant remotely. "Perhaps, Russ, you would like to account for your movements this evening, since you left the canteen at dinner time."

"Sure. I went back to my quarters. I washed and shaved and changed."

"That's rather vague. Did you see anyone, or talk to anyone?"

"No."

"Did you remain in your quarters all the time?"

"No—I went out for a few minutes."

"Where?"

"Oh, I just took a walk—over to the lagoon."

"What time was that?"

"Around a quarter to nine, I guess."

"How long did you stay out?"

"Just a few minutes. The truth is I was waiting for someone to call and got sort of impatient when it got late."

"Who were you waiting for?"

"You might as well know. It's no secret. Kay Kinley."

"I see." Strang frowned pensively, as if pursuing an elusive idea.

"I went out again around nine-thirty," Farrant volunteered. "I looked in at Kay's quarters, but she wasn't home. When I got back to my billet, she'd arrived. She told me about—Hilde. We both came straight over here."

"All the same," said Strang, "you can't *prove* that you were in your quarters most of the evening, or that you walked as far as the lagoon. I want corroborated evidence."

"Meaning you don't want the truth?"

Strang scowled. "Of course I

want the truth, but it has to be verifiable."

"You calling me a liar, Guy?"

Strang walked forward very slowly, hands still clasped behind his back. "Russ," he said, not unkindly, "you are a journalist by profession. You of all people should know the necessity for corroboration in evidence. A member of our staff has been murdered, and one of us must have done it. There is nobody else on the island. My first task, obviously, is to sort out those who have what we might call a definite alibi . . ."

"You mean that I don't come into that category?"

"Not so far, Russ."

Farrant threw his cigarette stub on to the floor and ground it into extinction with his foot. "How about you yourself, Guy? Have *you* got an alibi?"

The ghost of a smile distorted the line of Strang's lips. "I was expecting that, but not from you. Yes. I have an alibi, though, like you, I should be hard put to prove it. Fortunately I don't need to prove it, for it was I who discovered Miss Bartok's body and immediately notified the rest."

"I suppose that let's you out," Farrant said sardonically.

"Not necessarily. But even you agree that the guilty party would hardly be the first to raise the alarm."

Farrant shook his head. "He might figure it would look better that way."

"There is one other thing. During the evening I wrote a long report on the first twenty-four hours of the count-down. From the condition of the ink it would be a simple matter for the police to determine exactly when it was written, and just how long it took

to write. I think *that*, as you say, would let me out."

"Thanks," said Farrant amiably. "You've reminded me that I did some writing too—logging film shots. It may not account for all my evening, but it certainly covers part of it."

"Then let's concentrate on the part that's not covered. You say you went out twice. Did you visit this building at all?"

"No."

"What were your relationships with Miss Bartok?"

"Formal."

"I take it your relations with Miss Kinley are—let us say—less formal."

"You take it right."

"Since when?"

"Since yesterday."

Strang said: "Everything seems to have happened since yesterday. Earl disappears. You establish some kind of relationship with Miss Kinley, and Miss Bartok is killed. And in some way it seems to center round you, Russ. Had you noticed that?"

"It's not apparent to me."

Strang swung himself awkwardly into a chair and placed his hands firmly on his knees. Determination was beginning to glitter in his eyes.

"Sit down," he ordered. "I want to talk to you about George Earl . . ."

After forty minutes of exhausting cross-talk with Strang, Farrant returned to the domestic camp. Passing through the reactor room he waved a hand at MacClennon.

"You're quite sure you've finished?" MacClennon said with sarcasm.

"He's got a thing about me. I

thought I was in for an all night interrogation."

"You don't know how to handle him," MacClennon declared brusquely.

It was midnight plus, but somehow Farrant didn't feel tired. Now that the initial shock of Hilde's death had subsided he felt vaguely bored by the proceedings. To hell with Strang, he thought. Why should I worry? I told the truth and I'm in the clear.

As he neared the domestic camp he saw a dark figure coming towards him, and presently he recognized the squat shape of Doc Youd—a tired and preoccupied Doc Youd.

"For God's sake, Farrant—I didn't even see you . . ."

"I'm big enough," Farrant pointed out. "Finished the autopsy?"

"After a fashion. I didn't dig too deep—just enough to confirm the cause of death."

"Was it . . . ?"

"It was. There are distinct thumb and finger impressions. I suppose I ought to make my report direct to Strang."

"Strang may be asking the questions, but he's on the suspect list, too. All we've got so far is a murder with no apparent motive."

"I discovered that Miss Bartok is about eight weeks pregnant," said Youd. "How about that for a motive?"

Farrant considered. "Possible, but remote. After eight weeks she couldn't be too sure . . ."

"In any case, it points to a very intimate liaison with one of the men here. Who knows what kind of intrigues are involved?"

"You mean the old eternal triangle? It doesn't seem to fit, Doc—not here, among scientists."

Youd laughed briefly. "You may

not believe it, but scientists are also human. Technical training doesn't change character. Six men and two women just waiting; the tropical climate. Anything could happen."

"And has happened," Farrant added.

"I'd better get on, Russ. Is Strang still in the reactor block?"

"Yes. Right now he's cross-examining MacClennon—or vice versa."

"See you later."

Farrant continued on his way towards the domestic camp. The light was still on in Kay's billet. He tapped on the door. It opened almost instantly.

"I thought you'd changed your mind, Russ," she said.

"Strang gave me a long grilling," he explained. "Seems I was rather stupid in not arranging a foolproof alibi for this evening. Then there's the business of George Earl. Altogether Strang is acting as if someone put a flea in his ear."

"Perhaps someone did?"

"Doc Youd has the biggest flea. During the autopsy he dug up what looks like a motive."

"Such as?"

Farrant told her the substance of his talk with Youd, then went on to outline the trend of Strang's questioning. "What seems odd to me," he continued, "is the way Strang is pursuing this thing—almost as if he had forgotten about the count-down."

"He's in a difficult spot, Russ. The sane thing to do would be to halt the project and call in the police and Security. But it might be weeks before conditions are right for another count-down. On the other hand he can't sit back and do nothing at all about the

serious business of murder. He's trying to compromise by continuing with the count-down, and investigating Hilde's death at the same time."

Farrant nodded absently. "You may be right, but Youd's evidence is going to establish a definite link between Hilde and one of the men, and MacClennon thinks he knows which one."

"Well—which one? Or is it a secret?"

"No secret—but it's speculative. According to Mac, Strang himself has been having clandestine meetings with the girl."

"Not Strang," Kay said skeptically. "He's married anyway."

"So's Mac, and the Doc, and Earl for that matter. Marriage isn't a cure-all."

"But Guy Strang . . .?"

"I'm not accusing Strang of anything."

He glanced at his watch and saw that the time was already after one A.M. Reluctantly he stood up. "It's late, Kay—and we've both got to catch up on our sleep."

She came closer to him, and he took her in his arms. "I'm sorry our evening got loused up, honey, but we can pick it up again tomorrow."

"Let's promise not to talk shop tomorrow," she suggested.

He nodded. "Only about you and me."

"Yes. We don't know a great deal about each other, do we?"

"We know the one important thing, Kay—that we're right for each other."

He kissed her gently, and was about to repeat the maneuver when there was the sound of running footsteps, growing louder.

Kay crossed to the door and opened it. Farrant recognized the

pink, breathless, bearded face of Hoevler.

Running was not quite in Hoevler's line, and he had difficulty in recovering his breath.

"Anything wrong, Joe?" Farrant asked.

"Everything's wrong!" Hoevler managed to blurt out. "The whole damn island's gone stark crazy. There's a homicidal maniac loose, Russ."

"What are you trying to say?" Farrant demanded.

"I was over at the rocket doing a late stint when Strang phones through at the control point. So I go over, but he's not in the reactor room, and I look round, and he's with MacClennon near the edge of the lagoon, and they're looking at something . . ."

"Go on," Farrant said starkly, sensing what was coming next.

"It was Doc Youd," Hoevler continued. "Half in the water, half out. It looked as if he had stumbled in the dark and knocked himself cold—only it wasn't an accident, Russ. Someone had beaten his brains in with a rock."

CHAPTER 5

BY TWO A.M. they were all assembled in the reactor room once more. Weariness dulled the wild glitter of Strang's sombre eyes. MacClennon was stooping a little as he leaned against the concrete wall. Hoevler, standing truculently with legs astride and hands deep in his trouser pockets, showed symptoms of flagging. Kay sat motionless on one of the austere tube chairs. Farrant rubbed the knuckles of his fingers with his thumbs and forced his mind to concentrate.

Strang said: "We are facing a

major crisis, not only among ourselves, but in relation to the civilized world as a whole. I feel that there is no alternative but to abandon the count-down and call in the military. We could rightly have been flexible enough to cope with one murder and still carry out the project. But two . . ."

Farrant said: "Shall I break radio silence?"

"It may well come to that, Russ. First we need to complete a picture of what happened for our own information. Doctor Youd was attacked on the way from his surgery to the reactor room after he had completed the autopsy on Miss Bartok. It seems not improbable that whoever killed him had reason to fear the result of that autopsy."

"Could be," Farrant agreed. "On the other hand, the Doc didn't take his secret with him. I met him as I was on my way back to the domestic camp, and we talked for a while. He must have been killed soon after I left him."

A subtle change of expression was discernible in Strang's face. "Then you were the last person to see Youd alive?"

"No," Farrant answered flatly. "The killer was the last."

"What did Dr. Youd tell you—about the autopsy?"

"He confirmed the cause of death—manual strangulation. And he said that Hilde—Miss Bartok—was eight weeks pregnant."

No reaction from anyone. A paralyzed moment of time.

"He thought that might have been the motive for killing her—for the Doc's murder, too."

"In what way?"

"To stop him from reporting his discovery."

Hoevler snorted audibly. "Supposing there wasn't a motive?"

"There's always a motive, Joe," MacClennon said sourly. "People don't kill for the sheer hell of it. Hilde did have an intimate friend, and I'm not surprised she's pregnant."

"Who?" Hoevler demanded.

"The big white chief himself. Guy Agnes-or-bust Strang."

Farrant glanced at Strang, but there was no tell-tale reaction in the acrid set of his tight lips.

MacClennon went on: "In the ordinary way I'd have respected Strang's secret, but this is no ordinary way. I'm not suggesting that he's the murderer, but he's just as much a suspect as anyone—perhaps more so. He could have killed the girl, and he could have killed Doc Youd."

"How come?" asked Farrant.

MacClennon eyed him icily. "Because after he'd finished questioning you I went into the ante-room and told him just what I've told you all. I ordered him to send a radio message to the carrier, calling in outside help. He refused, and I left. I was in the room about half a minute, not more. At that time Doc Youd was starting out on his last walk round the lagoon, and there were three of us who could have attacked him at that time—Strang, Farrant or myself. Hoevler was busy in the rocket. Miss Kinley we can count out."

"I'd rather be counted in," Kay said.

"Now let's look at hard facts," MacClennon continued. "Three of us in this room have bloodstains on our clothing—Strang, Hoevler and myself. But we picked up those stains while manhandling Youd's body—that's true for two of us, anyway. The third one could have picked up some of the stains during the act of murder."

True enough, Farrant, thought. The three men did indeed have dark stains on their clothing. He was suddenly conscious that MacClennon was looking straight at him.

"That would seem to let Farrant out," MacClennon went on, "but in fact it doesn't. He had time to change his clothes. It could be that we might find bloodstained clothing in his quarters."

A chill metal clamp tightened abruptly on Farrant's heart. A picture of the laundry basket hovered ghostlike in the darkness of his mind. But MacClennon couldn't know—couldn't possibly know...

Hoevler said sarcastically, "You want my opinion? Earl is the key. Find him and you'll solve the mystery."

"You mean Earl is the killer?" Farrant asked.

"I mean Earl is dead, and he was the first victim. If that's true then three people have been murdered, and no motive in the world can explain that—except one."

"And that is . . . ?"

"The obvious one. Sabotage. Why do you suppose Earl was the first to disappear? Because he was the Security officer—the guy most likely to clamp down on subversion. With him out of the way the rest is easy."

Hoevler's biting words produced a profound silence that seemed to go on and on indefinitely.

"You mean," Strang said, "that one of us is—an enemy agent . . . ?"

"Either Earl is the killer, if he's alive, or if he's dead, then it must be one of us. It may not even be on the conscious level. With modern techniques of indoctrination and post-hypnotic suggestion anyone of us could murder and not

even know it. You've heard of schizophrenia."

"You can't be serious," Strang muttered.

"All I'm saying is—you're looking for the wrong motive. This isn't a matter of he-and-she stuff. One of us is out to smash the Agnes project. If we should all die here on Kaluiki, it would take years to train a new team, and in that time the Soviets might easily catch up."

Strang, still vaguely incredulous, said: "You're suggesting that all of us are going to be—murdered . . . ?"

"All except one," said Hoevler.

Strang bit his lip for a second or two. He turned to Farrant. "Russ," he ordered, "I want you to go over to the radio cabin and send a priority signal to operational headquarters on the carrier."

"Break radio silence?"

"Yes. Ask them to send a Security force to the island at the earliest possible moment. We are all of us to be placed under arrest pending a full investigation. Point out that this is most urgent. Meanwhile—the count-down has to stop. MacClennon, close down the reactor."

Hoevler said slowly: "Is that wise, Guy?"

"What else is there to do?"

"If the object of the murderer is to stop the Agnes project, then you're playing right into his hands."

"But I can't break radio silence and continue the count-down. It would be contrary to operational orders."

"To hell with operational orders!"

"Then what do you suggest?"

"Carry on with the count-down, but break radio silence just the

same. One emergency message isn't going to give away the Agnes project to Rusky monitors. Let operational control take the responsibility for a shut down—all we're asking for is a murder investigation."

Strang rubbed his hands together in weak indecision. All the leadership that he had exhibited during the past months on the island seemed to have evaporated. It may have been fatigue, aggravated by some degree of neurosis following on the tragic events of the day, but surrender was implicit in his manner.

He said: "All right, Hoevler. That seems logical enough. Farrant will call control on the r/t, and we'll keep the reactor running until definite instructions are received to close down."

"Fine," Hoevler remarked. "One other thing. The killer is still loose. We don't know who he is, and he may not even know himself. We all need to be very much on our guard . . ."

As Farrant approached the radio cabin, its parabolic aerials glittered in the starlight, symbolizing the massive technological organization in which he was a mere component part.

Beyond the aerials lay the small concrete building, dark and deserted, with its emergency diesel generator lying idle to the rear. He unlocked the door and entered, switching on the light.

The first thing that caught his eye was an axe in the center of the floor—one of the heavy-duty axes with a shaft four feet long. He stared at it for a long time without thinking, merely registering its presence without curiosity. In a strange night its strangeness was unremarkable.

Presently he glanced around the room, impersonally scanning the gray rack and panels of the transmitters and receivers. There was something quite wrong, but such was his unreceptive frame of mind that he was not immediately able to pin-point it.

The lethargy that had been paralyzing his mind vanished in a frantic instant of realization. Quickly he checked the apparatus, and soon he was able to confirm that every single item of radio equipment had been effectively sabotaged beyond all possible repair.

He went over to the spares locker, but found the door forced open. Valves and components, utterly smashed, were strewn on the shelves and on the floor.

He crossed to the internal telephone that linked the operational buildings of the island. Slowly he dialled the reactor room. In a moment Strang's resonant voice came over the wire.

"Strang speaking."

"This is Farrant."

"Someone has completely wrecked the equipment—every damn item of it. Someone—one of us—has had a field day. We can't make radio contact with control."

Strang's voice was strangely quiet and restrained. "I think you'd better come back here, Russ. The others have gone back to their quarters, but we can talk just the same. There's no point in disturbing them."

"I guess not," Farrant said. "I'll be right over."

It was not until he was out under the night sky again that the full significance of Strang's manner took possession of his mind. *The others have gone back to their quarters—there's no point in dis-*

turbing them. A tense excitement began to tremble in his limbs. It could be Strang, and this could be it. Strang had placed him next on the murder list. Strang himself could have sabotaged all of the radio equipment. Strang, Strang, Strang—

A minute later sanity reasserted itself. After all, Strang had really said nothing that could be interpreted as an open threat.

He stopped, stroking his lips thoughtfully. Strang would be waiting there, alone. No sense in taking chances. A guy had to be prepared . . .

He followed the curve of the lagoon, veering away from the reactor block, making for the domestic camp.

In his own quarters he found Earl's revolver and inspected it cursorily. Five of the chambers were loaded, and that seemed to balance the odds quite nicely, for, so far as he knew, this was the only weapon on the island, if one discounted the explosives in the store at dispersal point. He crossed to the wall mirror and smiled at the drawn face that stared hollowly at him from the glass.

"Guy, my friend," he murmured, "take care. Take great care."

He walked back to the reactor block without hurry, pacing confidently, almost jauntily, over the hard cracked ground.

He entered the reactor building with considerable caution, advancing silently along the short corridor that led to the reactor room itself. The door was open and the lights on. He hesitated at the entrance, then advanced into the room, probing every corner and shadow with alert eyes. No sign of Strang.

"Guy," he called.

It could have been the dead silence of outer space.

He moved forward. At the door he paused, turning the handle slowly. The door swung open.

Strang was there, lying awkwardly, face down, near the modern glass-topped desk. The dark hair at the back of his head oozed crimson blood that dripped sluggishly on to the brown gloss of the lino.

Farrant closed his eyes. No point in thinking further. All the basic premises were wrong. Strang was eliminated. The circle had narrowed again. Hoevler, MacClennon, Kay and himself. Plus the elusive Earl.

Suddenly he knew that he had to solve the Earl enigma once and for all. Either the man was in hiding on the fringes of the camp, preying on his colleagues, or he was dead.

He thought, we're on our own. No possibility of outside help. And I'm one jump ahead of the others—I know about this.

False, he realized. The killer knows too. And he knew them before I did. Therefore *he's* one jump ahead.

I'll wake Kay and stay with her tonight. It's the only logical thing to do. Kay won't mind—she *can't* mind. Standards have no meaning, and we're back to basic evolution—the survival of the fittest.

The reactors continued to whine as he left the building, accumulating immense power for operational zero, thirty-three hours in the unimaginable future.

Kay had lain on her bunk, staring at the ceiling. Thoughts tumbled through her mind, but she made no effort to marshal them.

She put on the light and allowed

herself to be kissed, but it was a formula with no emotional content.

"Kay," he said quietly, "we've got to come to terms with something we don't understand. The first two killings might have had some kind of ordinary human motivation, but that's no longer possible."

"You mean—there's been another . . .?"

"Strang. Someone knocked a sizeable cavity in the back of his skull."

He told her the full story, and the final discovery of Strang's body. She remained silent for a long time when he had finished, then said:

"Russ—where did you get a revolver from?"

He had to stop and think. "It's George Earl's," he explained. "I meant to return it today, but, of course, I couldn't find him."

"But how did you come to have Earl's gun, Russ?"

"I think he left it in the jeep when we came down from the hill last night."

"You don't sound very certain about it."

"As a matter of fact I'm not. I probably didn't pay much attention to what was happening."

He took two cigarettes from a pack and put one between her lips.

"Russ," she said hesitantly, "you've got yourself deeply involved in this business, haven't you? I mean, more so than anyone else . . ."

"What exactly do you mean, Kay?"

"First there's Earl. You go off on a trip with him, and no one has seen him since, but you've got his gun. Then Doc Youd. You were

the last person to see him alive, just before he was killed. Now Guy Strang—you were the one to find the body. Russ, can't you see the pattern that's building up."

"No, I can't."

"It's ugly. It makes you look . . ." She broke off abruptly. "Don't misunderstand me, darling. I know that everything you've told me is true. It's just that . . ."

"It's just that any one-eyed moron could see that Russell Farrant must clearly be the homicidal maniac," he interrupted brusquely and tonelessly.

"I didn't mean it that way, Russ!"

"You're dead right, anyway. I am involved but it doesn't really matter. The issue has become clear cut—the two of us against the rest."

"You mean both MacClennon and Hoevler?"

"And Earl too, if he's still around. We can't afford to take chances."

"But, come tomorrow, what can we do anyway?"

"First, we have to stay together from now on. The two of us combined stand a better chance than either alone—and we have the gun between us. Next is to talk with MacClennon and Hoevler, if only to decide what's to be done about the count-down, and about contacting headquarters on the carrier."

"And then . . .?"

"To find George Earl."

"But how?"

He took time off to consider. How, indeed? No point in exploring the hill. There wasn't time.

He said: "The way I see it, the whole business started with that strange trace on the radar screen. That was why Earl went up the hill in the first place, and why I

went with him. I took my camera, but I can't remember if I used it."

An irrelevant memory stirred in his subconscious. "On the other hand, when I was checking through the exposed film packs a few hours ago, I came across some shots I hadn't logged and couldn't recall. Maybe four or five. Do you suppose I could have taken some pictures on the hill?"

"You ought to know, Russ."

"Well, I don't know."

"Can't you find out?"

"Kay, I haven't got the facilities for processing color film—at least, not in a big way. Just a test kit for checking color response on film batches. They deteriorate fast in this climate."

Her hand touched his in the darkness. "It wouldn't have to be in a big way, Russ. Four or five, you said. Isn't it worth a try?"

"You ever seen badly processed color film, Kay?"

She squeezed his hand. "Russ, you're making excuses, as if you don't want to develop that film. Perhaps you just don't want to process those pictures because deep in your mind you know what's on them . . ."

Resentment ignited suddenly in his mind. "For God's sake, Kay, stop making veiled accusations. You imagine maybe I killed Earl then took pictures of his dead body?"

"I didn't say that, Russ."

"Whose side are you on? Maybe you'd rather join Hoevler and MacClennon. Maybe you'd . . ."

She came over to him and gently took his arm. "I'm on your side—you know damn well I am. Believe me, I'm only trying to help."

"All right," he said sullenly.

"It's just that I think those pictures may be important."

"Why should they be?"

"Because . . . you can't even remember taking them. You don't forget things like that, especially when it's part of your job."

He put his arms round her and drew her towards him. "Kay," he murmured, "I'm sorry. It was almost as if something had taken possession of my mind for a moment."

She kissed him lightly. "It's been a bad day for all of us."

"I'll process those negatives in the morning—first thing. Then we'll talk with the other two."

CHAPTER 6

THE next morning Kay accompanied Farrant to his quarters. She watched while he gathered what equipment he had and did his best to process the undeveloped and unidentified film sheets.

In due course, after fixing, the wet transparencies were ready. Farrant wiped off the surplus moisture and held them up to the light against the window.

The color rendering was good—too good. Four of the shots were of the same subject, and the fifth showed a dark brown crater in wild ground. The figure in the four shots was plainly horrific. The face had been split in two and dark crimson blood obliterated the features, but certain details made identification relatively simple. The mystery of George Earl had been solved, but in its place was an even greater mystery—one which Farrant felt focused on himself.

Kay looked at the transparencies, and when he glanced covertly at her he noticed the sudden pallor of her complexion. He rigged a temporary line from bunk to

window and clipped the films to it for drying. Then he lit a cigarette and looked at her, but she avoided his eyes.

"What happens now?" he asked impersonally.

"I don't know, Russ," she said tonelessly.

"You think I did it?"

She turned to him abruptly, and he was surprised at the savage fire in her eyes.

"Russ, you took those pictures. Don't you remember?"

He shook his head.

"You and Earl climbed the hill—just the two of you. You *must* have killed him!"

"It looks that way," he said quietly. "No one else could have done it, and even the most suicidally-minded character couldn't have done—that—to himself. But why should I kill George Earl? What motive could there be?"

"It started with Earl," she said mechanically. "You killed Earl. And then Hilde Bartok, and Doc Youd, and Guy Strang—and you *didn't even know you were doing it!* You still don't know, do you, Russ?"

He said nothing, for there seemed to be nothing to say.

"Why?" she demanded. "*Why?*"

He turned away from her and glanced at the hanging transparencies. Evidence, he thought—I've signed my own death warrant. And for some reason the phrase seemed familiar. It brought back a transient image of Earl, lying dead and mutilated, and he recognized the image as a memory—the first since that ominous journey across the hill.

But, he thought, if I did kill Earl, why should I sign my own death warrant by taking photographs? And what of the am-

nesia? It might prove to be the key to the whole problem.

"Kay," he said levelly, "let's be rational."

"I'm trying to be rational, Russ."

"Okay. These color pictures prove two things—Earl is dead, and I took photographs of him after his death. They don't prove anything more."

"No," she agreed. "The evidence is still circumstantial."

"I have no memory whatever. If I killed him, then why should I take photographs?"

"That makes sense," she conceded.

"I had nothing to do with the other deaths. I can account for every instant of my time, but I can't produce witnesses. MacClennon and Hoevler could be in the same boat."

"Why not include me, too, Russ?"

"I wouldn't class violent murder in your line, Kay."

"A few hours ago I'd have said the same about you."

"Let's stick to fact," he insisted. "We have photographs, and we have a collection of dead bodies. There are four of us left, and one of us is the guilty party—perhaps more than one. What intrigues me is the suggestion of pattern in the way things have happened—of intelligent planning."

"In what way, Russ?"

"Well, first Earl, the Security dog, is dispatched—the guy most likely to intervene in further assassination. Then subsequent deaths are arranged in such a way as to suggest motives that, in fact are irrelevant"

"For what true purpose?"

"Sabotage. Perhaps an attempt to destroy the entire Agnes team."

He glanced at his wristwatch. "It's almost nine-thirty. Time we had some breakfast. One thing, Kay—please say nothing about the photographs for now."

"Why not?"

"I want us all to be on an equal footing. I don't want to be at the wrong end of an interrogation. It would only waste time, and we haven't got time to waste. If Earl is mentioned, leave me to do the talking."

"All right, Russ."

"You see, honey—whatever may be the truth about Earl's death, either MacClennon or Hoevler is responsible for the others. We don't want the dice loaded against us . . ."

She sighed. "I hope you're right, darling."

Both Hoevler and MacClennon were in the canteen radiating weary solemnity. As Kay and Farrant came in, they concentrated on their sausages and beans.

"Morning," Hoevler said in sardonic greeting. "What's new from the homicide front?"

Watching the two of them carefully, Farrant said: "Strang."

For all the reaction he might have said Mickey Mouse. Both men continued eating, but presently Hoevler raised his eyes. They were quite expressionless. "Tell us about it."

"Nothing much to tell, except someone beat Strang's skull into a sponge."

"You found the body?" MacClennon asked.

"Yes," he replied.

"So—give or take on George Earl, we're four or five."

"Earl is dead too. I was able to confirm it."

Hoevler regarded Farrant with

wide, curious eyes. "Clever stuff, Russ. How did you manage that?"

"I'll explain later. Right now, you can take my word for it."

MacClennon added tersely: "Did you contact control headquarters?"

"Someone got in first and wrecked the radio equipment in the cabin."

MacClennon and Hoevler exchanged glances. Farrant went on: "We're completely isolated, with no possibility of establishing contact—until they come to us after operational zero—that is, if there ever is an operational zero."

Hoevler said calmly, "In a sense we've been lucky. We've still got enough of a team to carry on with the count-down. Mac here can take care of the reactor. I'll look after the rocket and the anti-grav screens, and Kay can handle the radar monitoring. And you, Russ . . ."

"And me," Farrant prompted.

"Well, now—what can you do?"

Farrant didn't like the question, and for a reason he couldn't define he didn't like Hoevler's attitude; at the same time he had no definite grounds for objection.

Hoevler smiled grimly. "It's zero minus twenty-six. If we could all keep busy for the next twenty-six hours there might not be any more killings, Russ!"

"I don't see why," Farrant said. "If one of us has that kind of assignment—even on a subconscious brainwashed level—he wouldn't be likely to abandon it, would he?"

Kay was bringing a tray over to the table: two plates of sausages and beans, with coffee. She served the breakfast, put the empty tray on a nearby table, then sat down.

"Russ brought us up to date," Hoevler said. "We don't know who killed Strang or Hilde or Earl, or

Doc Youd. They could have killed each other—with one exception. The last to die was Strang, and one of us sitting here at this table must have murdered him. Agreed?"

"Agreed," Farrant murmured. MacClennon and Kay nodded mutely.

"We could waste a helluva lot of time trying to hang a murder rap on one of us, and it wouldn't stick. So let's forget it."

"I don't get you, Joe," Farrant remarked.

Hoevler shrugged disarmingly. "Simple enough. We agree to stop playing detective. Instead we concentrate like mad on the count-down procedure. More important, we try to advance the operational zero—bring it forward by three or four hours and launch the rocket several hours ahead of schedule."

Farrant shook his head in perplexity. "But does that matter now?"

"It might matter a great deal. If the test is successful then others can pick up from there, and take it forward, but right now the future of the entire project rests in our hands. The important thing is that there has to be a *first* operational test. When it is successful, mankind will have opened up a new route into the unknown. He will have acquired the power to twist space and time into new shapes."

Hoevler continued, slowly and deliberately: "Someone—or something—is trying to stop this test—is trying to destroy every man and woman engaged on it. The same someone—or something—will interfere with every future test. That's why we have to succeed. Does that make sense?"

"Half sense."

"Fine. Let's settle for half sense. Mac thinks he can speed up the

reactor, maybe cut four hours from the build-up time. The busier we are, the less likely anyone of us is to indulge in murder, and we can reinforce that by insisting on complete segregation."

"I understand," Kay said abruptly. "Mac stays in the reactor block, Joe stays at the launching pad, and I stay in the radar and computer room."

"Exactly," Hoevler stated. "Until after zero."

"What about food?"

"We take rations with us."

"And sleep?"

"We don't sleep. There won't be time anyway."

Kay glanced pensively at Farrant. "And what about Russ?"

Hoevler's eyes were bright. "Ah, Russ," he remarked. "I'm afraid Russ is going to be a problem. What are we going to do about Russ, who has nothing to do?"

"I have my photographic assignment," Farrant pointed out.

"It won't do, Russ. You have to be segregated, or . . ."

"Or what?"

Hoevler glanced at MacClennon. "Mac and I talked it over. We think you ought to die, Russ."

"No!" Kay gasped suddenly.

Hoevler waved a restraining hand. "We're being objective, Kay. We must think of the project. Everything points to Russ as the killer—right from first to last. Even if we should prove to be wrong, we can't afford to take chances. Russ has to be eliminated."

"That might not be so easy," Farrant said calmly. "And your scheme isn't so foolproof, anyway. While you're all busy segregating yourselves, anyone of you could

sneak up on the others to commit a little quiet violence."

"Except for one thing, Russ," Hoevler said intently. "If our minds are fully occupied, then the chances of anything gaining possession are less likely."

"How do you mean—*gaining possession* . . . ?"

"You ought to know, Russ," said Hoevler insistently. "Something takes over your mind and you don't remember a thing about it, and that something is out to kill—and each and everyone of us—step by step . . ."

"Assuming you know what you're talking about, Joe—what might that *something* be?"

Strangeness gleamed hollowly in Hoevler's green eyes. "Something that wouldn't like to see homo sapiens learn how to control gravitational fields—or travel in spaceships that could reach the speed of light—or reach the stars—or *travel faster than light*. How's your relativity, Russ? You know what would happen if we managed to exceed the speed of light?"

"I haven't the slightest idea," said Farrant quietly, studying the other man.

Hoevler smiled. "It's quite simple. At the speed of light a projectile will contract in the direction of its motion to—nothingness. Lorentz and Fitzgerald produced a formula for it. Mass becomes infinite. Acceleration falls to zero. The speed of light is a limiting velocity in space."

"Then . . . how can you possibly exceed it?"

"You can't—not in space. But you can continue to push energy into the projectile. A shift takes place in the geodesic axis."

"Meaning . . . ?"

"You're no longer travelling

through space, Russ. You're travelling through time."

Farrant slipped one hand into his jacket pocket and touched the cold metallic surface of the gun with his fingertips. The sensation was reassuring. Hoevler's mind was running on a crazy track.

Kay said: "Joe, aren't you projecting rather too imaginatively? We ought to stick to facts."

Hoevler turned his hypnotic green eyes toward her. "This is one of those times when fact and theory interlock. We're all in danger, but more than anything we're in danger from the non-scientist. He's the one who could be permitted to survive, because he knows virtually nothing about the Agnes technology. He's the outsider whose survival doesn't matter."

Farrant looked at MacClennon. "How about you, Mac? You always seemed a level-headed character."

MacClennon fidgeted uncomfortably on his chair. "We may be able to lock you up some place until after zero . . ."

Hoevler laughed tersely. "There isn't a hut on this island capable of holding any of us for more than an hour."

"There's the explosives store."

"Fine," said Hoevler. "Make Russ a present of a couple of hundredweight of dynamite and gelignite."

"How about you, Kay?" asked Farrant, turning to the girl.

She regarded him steadily, with little hint of concern in her hazel eyes. "I'm not sure," she answered. "I think Joe is on to something, and I think it's a good idea to advance the count-down and to agree to complete segregation. But you're the unpredictable factor, Russ, and you could have killed the others. I told you that before."

Farrant allowed the ghost of a smile to add an ironic twist to his lips. "Is that the death sentence, too?"

"I wouldn't like to say, Russ. Hoevler seems to have taken command. I'll fall in with whatever seems best for the majority."

"Thank you," said Hoevler, inclining his head in mock politeness. "At twelve o'clock we're going to skip a few pages in the book of rules. We take the count-down as being at zero minus twenty. Later, when Mac has had a chance to check on the reactor, we may be able to lop off another couple of hours. The intention is to bring zero forward from noon tomorrow to eight A.M., or earlier."

MacClennon and Kay murmured their agreement.

"Between now and midday there's the disposal of the dead. We'll have to shift the food packs from the deep-freeze store and put the bodies in there. The authorities will need to see them. MacClennon and I will attend to that. Kay you fix up some food packs."

Kay left the table without glancing at Farrant.

Hoevler heaved himself out of his chair with a weary motion, and MacClennon did likewise. They came around the table and hovered over Farrant.

"Russ," he said, "you must think I'm a gosh-awful ruthless cad with a brain the size of a pea. We took you for a ride, though, and you ought to have seen your face!" He laughed and slapped his thigh. "Jeeze, I never got so much attention in all my life!"

Farrant pushed his chair away and stood back to get a more remote view of Hoevler's new tactics. He made no comment, but watched the other man carefully.

"Only got yourself to blame," Hoevler continued happily. "Just sitting there confessing that you had nothing to do and you might as well be dead. What the hell do they pay you for, hey? Tell me that?"

"You know the answer," Farrant said.

"All I can say is that I haven't seen much sign of it. Sure, you took a few pictures, but what have you been doing for the rest of the time?"

"Indulging my passion for homicide, according to you."

Hoevler laughed again, rather harshly. "You take life too seriously, Russ. It's a game—a zaney game at that. A game without rules. What d'you have to be so serious for? Go get your cameras. You've got work to do. There's bound to be an inquiry into the deaths of Strang and the others and we'd better put as much evidence on record as possible."

"You want me to take photographs of the bodies?"

"What else? Take as many pictures as you can, from all angles, just like they do in crime-does-not-pay movies. When you've finished we'll dump the bodies in the fridge. Okay?"

"Okay," said Farrant doubtfully. He remained standing, eyeing Hoevler with speculative caution. The other man returned his stare for a moment then said: "Well, get cracking, Russ. We can't stand here all day!"

Farrant walked out into the sun-glare. "Crazy," he murmured to himself. "All crazy—including me!"

Then he continued back toward his quarters, all the time wondering just what it was all about and where and how it would end.

BACK in his billet Farrant examined the now-dry color transparencies hanging from the string which he had fastened between bunk and window.

Earlier, in Kay's presence, he had been too disturbed to inspect the photographs in great detail; now, more leisurely, he subjected them to intensive scrutiny. It was possible to see the murder weapon—a long flat-bladed spade, glistening crimson with wet blood. From the four color pictures a police pathologist would no doubt be able to reconstruct the crime in great detail. But the fifth photograph was a puzzle.

It could have been a picture of a shallow grave, except that the shape was wrong. The ground had been dug into a cavity or crater some four feet across, and apart from loose lumps of brown soil there was nothing in the hole. Not quite accurate, he realized abruptly. There was something in the hole—something that had reflected the intense light of the flash at the instant the photograph had been taken. In the transparency it was a mere strip or silvery white against the tumbled brown of the soil. It might have been the blade of a knife, or a shard of bright metal.

He found a magnifying glass and inspected the metallic object in more detail. Oval, the edge indeterminate, as if more of the thing were concealed beneath the surrounding soil. If that were so, then it couldn't be a knife, in which case . . . ?

A conviction began to crystallize that this silver streak was in part responsible for the fantastic events of the past day. And supporting

the conviction was an elusive half-memory that had to do with Earl, and the trees, and the undergrowth, and the cavity in the ground, and a metallic object... But the memory was no more definite than that.

He removed the dry transparencies from the clips and slipped them into his filing system. No sooner had he finished this than the door behind him crashed open. He swung round and found himself face to face with Hoevler, and, to the rear, MacClennon.

There was an instant of suspended animation. Hoevler was tensed and half crouched, like a wild animal about to pounce, and in one clenched fist he held a bar of steel—one of the transverse members of the trellis radar towers. MacClennon was similarly armed, and like Hoevler was balancing his sanity on the knife edge of his nerves.

Farrant was about to challenge the two men when Hoevler threw himself forward, and the steel bar swung through the air in a glittering arc. Instinctively he flung himself sideways and grabbed for the gun in his pocket, but before he had time to reach the trigger MacClennon was upon him. He collapsed across the bunk. Steel flashed again. His head exploded in an incandescent stab of pain.

He lunged forward, butting MacClennon below the ribs. The room turned upside down. Time hovered while he dragged the gun from his pocket.

Then Hoevler was on him again, but he managed to retain his grip on the gun, rolling over into a corner of the room near the door. They were both above him now, white-faced and wide-eyed, and he

sensed the sudden intake of breath as they prepared for the kill.

He fired. The explosion detonated starkly in the room. The bullet smacked through the asbestos wall, leaving a bright peephole of light. Hoevler and MacClennon were stricken with paralysis.

Holding the gun steadily, Farrant struggled to his feet. "Back," he ordered. "Back."

Hoevler and MacClennon retreated to the bunk.

"Sit down," said Farrant. They sat down. The two men were staring sullenly at the gun, acknowledging its lethal superiority.

"Earl's gun," Hoevler said acidly. "Now we know."

"You had me fooled, Joe," Farrant said. "That double talk of yours. But you really meant to kill me."

Hoevler's eyes were cold and baleful.

Farrant weighed the gun in his hand. "I could kill both of you here and now. It would solve a lot of problems. One bullet each, between the eyes."

"Russ," said Hoevler. "It was all a mistake. Hell, we've all been under strain. The wonder is that we've been able to think rationally at all. What say we have a conference to sort out the whole business once and for all."

Farrant wiped his hand across his forehead. Somewhere behind his eyes a power hammer pounded his brain.

"You had your turn, now it's mine. Only one thing stops me from killing the two of you. I want to prove that I'm not the killer. If I were, neither of you would be alive now."

"So what are you going to do?"

"Get up."

The two men stood up.

"Outside."

They walked over to the door, and moved out into the sunlight. Farrant followed them, but remained in the doorway.

"Beat it," he ordered. "Carry on with your count-down, or whatever it was you'd planned. I've got a job to do on the hill. I'll be there all day, I imagine, and maybe most of the night. So you've got the complete segregation you wanted. Cherish it. Now get moving."

Farrant went across to the canteen. He collected a few cans of miscellaneous foods, plus a can opener, a crate of canned beer, and added a bottle of Scotch whiskey.

Next he got the jeep from the maintenance area and drove over to his quarters. He loaded the cameras—then on to the canteen to pick up the food and drink. Finally he set off to the hill. This is the final phase. The end is in sight.

It began with Earl, and it may very well end with Earl, he told himself, and that curious raw hollow in the ground with the glimpse of polished metal. Deep in his mind something resonated, and there was that strange feeling of *I have been here before*. If I retrace the ground we covered it may provide the solution to the entire fantastic Kaluiki problem.

He thought about the things Hoevler had said. Obscure stuff—relativity, taking possession, the speed of light, and a vague allusion to travelling through time, and he couldn't help feeling that Hoevler knew what he was talking about. But even Hoevler, exploring in his mind the projected fantasies of circumstance and probability, could not put into simple words the thing that ob-

sessed him. Taking possession, for instance—what exactly did he mean by that? And for what purpose?

Farrant continued to pursue the trend of his thoughts as the jeep ascended the hill. Let's start with the basic facts. Agnes means anti-gravity, and that means a new immense power that could carry mankind to the planets and to the stars. So far, so good. If we stick to axioms we can't go wrong. What next? Taking possession? Well, supposing that on some remote planet in some remote system, perhaps light-years away from our own little universe, a race of intelligent creatures knows about this new advance, and realizes that mankind is about to spread throughout space. Supposing this alien race has a low opinion of human ethics, and does not welcome a human invasion of the universe. And supposing the aliens have a method by which they can interfere in human affairs—by which they can *take possession* of a human mind and control the actions of a human body. Supposing they wanted to prevent mankind from developing anti-gravity—to destroy the scientists responsible for the discovery . . .

Too many suppositions. There's a limit to coincidence, and it is unlikely that life exists outside this Earth, apart from the possibility of primitive vegetation on Mars, and perhaps Venus. Even given an intelligent life form on some unsuspected temperate planet in the perceivable cosmos, how could they possibly know about Earth, let alone what was happening on Earth? And how could they possibly interfere with a human mind—the product of an evolution quite different from anything they

could possibly obtain elsewhere? Hoover was simply being imaginative in his quaint cynical way. Faced with the incomprehensible he had devised a theory, if you could call it that, to fit the unfit facts, but the theory was invalid.

Near the summit of the hill, where the trail ended at the fringe of the miniature jungle, he stopped the jeep and got out.

He left the supplies in the jeep, taking only the miniature camera, since it seemed unlikely that he would require cine facilities. Uncertainly he moved off towards the jungle, deciding to make a quick preliminary reconnaissance so that he could localize the area of search. The time, he noted, was just after eleven o'clock.

We must have separated, Earl and I, he thought. Then maybe I heard a noise. When I got to the scene, Earl was already dead. That was why I took those photographs of Earl's body, and the thing in the crater.

But why the amnesia? Shock, perhaps? Sudden, horrifying shock. It could happen that way.

Not to me, he decided. I ran into enough violent crime in my reporting days. I was never shocked into amnesia before. It can't be amnesia, not in the ordinary sense of the word.

He circled round among the trees, arguing with the inner voice that resonated in his mind, and in the course of time he came upon a fallen tree trunk, broken in the middle and crudely splintered as if by hard quick impact. Something began to spin quietly in his brain. This was familiar, and the very fact of familiarity indicated that memory was beginning to function.

Beyond the tree was an area of rough bare ground, loose and lumpy as if recently dug over, circular in shape and some four feet in diameter. Again the elusive sense of recognition, and now excitement began to quiver in his arteries. This was it. Beneath this broken ground was the bright metallic enigma—the thing that had produced the phantom radar trace.

He began to laugh, but stopped immediately, disturbed by the jangling hint of hysteria in the tone of his voice. "Steady," he said aloud. "Steady, now."

A moment later, he cursed himself for omitting to bring a spade. He hung the camera by its strap from the twisted branch of a small tree. No time to waste. The ground was loose enough to shift with his bare hands, and sooner or later he knew that he would strike cold glinting metal.

What he did not fully realize was that long before he reached bare metal he would discover the buried remains of George Earl.

Farrant got back to the jeep at half-past four, tired, sick and dispirited. He had forgotten to bring the camera but that did not seem to matter.

The thing to do now was to talk with someone he could trust, someone who could help to maintain the sanity of his mind and assist him in analyzing the findings of his excavation.

He drank some whiskey, then climbed into the jeep and drove at speed down the hill track towards the operational site. But his mind was back in the jungle, still holding a frozen image of the mutilated thing that had been Earl, the thing that he had uncovered and dragged gently to one side, and

still seeing in starkly etched outline the shape of the metallic cone embedded deeply below Earl's grave.

With the discovery of the thing had come disconnected fragments of memory: the voice of George Earl echoing remotely in his skull, and wraithlike images of Earl against the night background of the jungle, Earl angry and vindictive. Earl saying: *Coward—you were scared of this trip from the start . . .* And again: *Rusted hulk of a ship! So damn rusty you can see your face in the chrome!* Earl laughing raucously, hysterically.

Then, more sinisterly: *Maybe I underrated you, Russ. Maybe you knew all the time. Who are you working for? What's your purpose? Espionage or sabotage, or both?*

The shaking finger on the trigger—the crashing explosion—the wild swing of the spade . . . It was all there in his mind, and it made him feel sick at heart.

He told himself, I killed Earl. Maybe I killed the others, too. The amnesia could have been induced by post-hypnotic suggestion or some other gobbledygook technique of modern indoctrination. Maybe I've been conditioned to kill and forget. It could be so, but why did I photograph Earl's body, and the crater?

Supposing something inside that curiously shaped cylinder of metal had seized control of his brain and pulled the mental strings that had made him kill Earl, then compelled him to bury the body? In a brief moment of sanity he could have cast off the aberration just long enough to take the flash pictures, acting on blind instinct.

But if that were so, where was that alien controlling force now? Why had it permitted him to exca-

vate with his bare hands, exposing the crime and the object, and so restoring vital patches of his erased memory? There seemed to be only one rational answer—that the force was not at home. It had gone visiting. It might, at this instant, be in possession of Hoevler, or MacClennon, or Kay.

And at that point, he thought, he had reached the limits of sanity. When you got down to facts, and in the long run only the facts would count, he had killed a man—maybe others, too. No wonder his reason seemed to be tottering on the brink of a gray abyss.

Instead of driving the jeep into the operational site, he turned off towards the restricted area. He parked the jeep behind the concrete blast wall where it could not be seen from the camp, then made his way around the side of the lagoon.

He by-passed the reactor block and went on towards the cluster of control buildings where the computers and radar gear were installed. He entered the radar room silently, making less noise than the faint clicking of the computers, but it was empty. Apprehension began to chill his heart. He checked through the entire building, going systematically from room to room, then inspected the adjacent huts, but there was no sign of Kay, nor any indication of recent habitation.

He stood in the sun, perspiring freely but cold inside, staring at the landscape in suppressed anger, clenching and unclenching his fists, regretting the hours he had spent on the hill. During that long interval the matter of life and death could have been decided—once, twice . . .

Abruptly he made up his mind,

and, seizing the revolver in his pocket, walked quickly towards the reactor block. With the feeling of positive action the sense of frustration evaporated swiftly. He knew now that he was going to gain mastery of the situation once and for all—if there was anything left to master. Scorning further caution he crashed his way through the double door and hurried into the reactor room.

CHAPTER 8

MACCLENNON was not in the reactor room, nor in the annex. Farrant, still gripping the gun in his pocket, began to sense a certain sinister foreboding. It was as if the island itself had become a dead thing, as if in his absence all life had been stripped from it—but the man-made machines were still functioning. The reactor mechanism whined, and the floor beneath his feet vibrated with latent power. At any instant he expected to see MacClennon walk casually into the room smoking a cigarette, and yet, for a reason he could not define, he knew that was unlikely.

Above the throb and hum of machinery he became aware of a subtle rhythmic sound, a repeated blipping, like a watery heartbeat, but irregular. He looked around carefully, trying to ascertain the part of the room from which it came.

He walked over to the reactor screen, noting that the dripping noise became louder, and peered through the small rectangular windows in turn, surveying the cold steel faces of the reactor banks. At the fourth window he stopped dead. A thin dark irregular line marked the reactor facing,

a line that glistened in the light of the hanging fluorescents, and seemed to be moving within itself. The precise color eluded him for a moment, but as he changed his position he observed that it was dark red.

The truth came to him in a minor shock wave. Blood was trickling down the face of the reactor, and at the same moment he remembered the steel catwalk poised high above the plant, behind the concrete wall, where he had taken pictures of the withdrawal of the damping bars during the boosting process.

Suddenly weary he made his way towards the catwalk. He ascended reluctantly, not anxious to discover what lay up there in the space above the reactors.

The shape half way along the catwalk was huddled, white-coated, the figure of MacClennon, lying face down, his head hanging between the railings of the catwalk.

Farrant turned him over gently. The blood came from a number of stab wounds in the chest and the throat. The weapon was still embedded in him, on the left side near the shoulder. Farrant recognized it as one of the long ratchet screwdrivers he had seen in the workshops adjoining the launching pad, the kind of thing Hoevler frequently used in his routine work on the rocket mechanisms.

It was Hoevler! It could have been Hoevler all the time. The truth seemed logical enough. Hoevler, with his pink baby face under the ostentatious beard, with the cynical twist in his alert mind. The next step was inevitable: he had to find Kay before it was too late, and then he had to destroy Hoevler. And, taking it from there, both he and Kay could face up to the

problem with a sense of security, even if facing up simply meant waiting until the helicopter arrived on the following day. But first things first . . .

Slowly he walked across to the launching site, watching the rocket gantry carefully for any sign of movement. Presently he was ascending in the elevator platform towards the open port in the projectile.

He stepped into the interior. Immediately voices came to his ears. Surprised, he identified them without difficulty—Kay was inside the projectile talking to Hoevler, and the conversation sounded quiet and friendly. He licked his lips with the tip of his tongue and strained to pick up the gist of the talk, but the voices were subdued, with a confusing reverberance in the hollow shell of the rocket, and he was unable to distinguish anything that made sense.

Leaning over on the dural platform he saw Hoevler and the girl on another platform some ten feet down.

He called out: "Hey, there!"

They looked up quickly. Farrant noted the caution and speculation in Hoevler's eyes—and in Kay's, too. Hoevler said something inaudible to the girl and she nodded. The implied liaison rang a remote alarm bell in Farrant's brain. Things seemed to be going a little awry, not quite as he had anticipated, and he was no longer so confident in his plan—but he still had the gun, and that was the ultimate key to whatever problem might arise.

"What do you want, Russ?" Hoevler demanded.

"I'm coming down," Farrant said.

The brief descent on the dural

ladder proved to be a major ordeal of nerves; with his back to Hoevler and his hands and feet fully occupied on the rungs, every second brought the tense expectation of lethal violence. But his fears proved to be groundless. He reached the platform safely, and found the others in exactly the same positions — Hoevler still squatting and Kay leaning against the bulkhead.

"Made up your mind?" asked Hoevler coldly.

"About what?" said Farrant after a pause.

"Who you're going to kill next? Or is it to be both of us?"

Farrant sighed and glanced at Kay, but her eyes were unresponsive—and rather melancholy, he thought.

"Hoevler," he said flatly, "you killed MacClennon. You killed him with one of your screwdrivers. I wouldn't have found out if I hadn't chanced to see blood trickling down the reactor face."

"Don't talk such bloody rubbish!" Hoevler spat out angrily. "I've been here all day and Kay's been in the control block, as we arranged. Segregation, remember? I phoned Mac a couple of hours back, got no reply, went over to the reactor room, and there he was. Kay didn't do it and I didn't do it. So it must have been you, Russ."

"Not very convincing, Joe. The segregation plan would make things easier—less chance of being disturbed."

"Even less chance for you. You taken a look at yourself recently? Maybe Mac rough-housed you before you were able to kill him. All those scratches on your hands..."

Farrant inspected his hands cursorily. "And all the dirt in the skin and under the nails . . . You

think I got that off Mac, too? Let's be sensible. If I'd wanted to kill Mac I'd have used the gun, and not a screwdriver."

"I figure you tried to," Hoevler said tartly. "But Mac was too quick for you. He knocked it from your hand, and maybe he tried to defend *himself* with a screwdriver, but you got it from him."

Farrant took the gun from his pocket, allowing it to dangle by the trigger-guard. His lips shaped a small sour grin. "Quite a facile character, aren't you, Joe? Always ready with the plausible talk. The guy who can explain anything and everything in words of one syllable, whether it's anti-gravity or murder. But this time your clever talk isn't going to explain anything." He looked at Kay, who was watching him pensively with tired eyes. "Kay," he said, "I spent the day on the hill, digging holes in the ground with my bare hands. I found Earl's body."

She nodded apathetically.

"And I found something else—right underneath where Earl was buried. Remember that mystery trace on the radar screen? Well, I found it, Kay. I uncovered part of it. The rest is buried deep in the topsoil just beyond the summit of the hill."

"What is it?" she asked.

"I'm damned if I know. It's a metallic object, roughly cone-shaped."

"A rocket of some kind?"

"I don't think so. At least, it's not the kind of rocket I've ever seen. It has a distorted shape—kind of twisted in some strange way."

Hoevler leaned forward, suddenly interested. "Are you on the level, Russ?"

"Yes."

"Twisted—in what way?"

"It's not so much twisted as curved, but the curvature seems to go the wrong way."

Hoevler bounced to his feet with such agility that Farrant reached instinctively for the gun he'd pocketed, but the other man grabbed his arm.

"Don't get aggressive, Russ. Let's talk. We might be getting somewhere after all."

"You see, I've been trying to fit all the things that have happened into some kind of pattern. But I never could complete the pattern because one piece was missing. This may be it."

"You mean . . . ?"

"I mean that the pattern called for some kind of outside agency—someone or something else on the island, outside our own team. That was impossible. Nothing could have arrived on the island without being observed—not even a rocket. The fleet radar chain would have picked it up almost before it was airborne. It had to be something which could arrive without being observed in transit. Now here one second, and there the next. Like that it would register as a new echo on the radar screen, but a stationary echo, and nobody could have seen it moving into position. It could remain unnoticed—nearly did, if it hadn't been for Kay's keen eyes."

"But how *did* it get here?" Farrant asked.

Hoevler grinned widely beneath his beard. "How, indeed? I'll tell you one thing—it didn't travel through space, Russ. Not the kind of space you and I know. Isn't that right, Kay?"

He turned eagerly to the girl, who nodded thoughtfully.

"Yes—I think you're right, Joe."

"So . . .", Farrant prompted, feeling slightly exasperated. "So I'm not such a fool as I look, and if you've been telling the truth then we've got this thing in the palm of our hands—that is if we can avoid killing each other for a few hours until we do what has to be done."

"Joe," said Farrant patiently, "you still haven't explained . . ."

"But I will, and very soon. First I want you to go over your story."

Farrant repeated his experience in greater detail, beginning with the first exploration of the hill with George Earl, mentioning the unaccountable period of amnesia, outlining the macabre discovery of Earl's fate on the color transparencies which he had processed, and finally describing the second journey to the hill which had resulted in the uncovering of Earl's body and the metallic finned cone.

"You swear that everything you've told me is true?" Hoevler demanded.

"In so far as my memory is accurate, yes."

Hoevler thumped the table with his fist. "There you've hit on a fundamental snag. When it comes to murder nobody can remember a damned thing. If you didn't kill MacClennon, then it must have been me, or Kay. But neither of us can remember."

"That's assuming *you're* telling the truth," Farrant pointed out.

"You miss my meaning," Hoevler remonstrated mildly. "What I'm saying is—none of us retains any memory of a killing. It is blacked out. You must have killed George Earl, but you can't remember. Either Kay or myself killed MacClennon, but we can't remem-

ber. Any one of us, or maybe all of us, could have killed Strang, Doc Youd and Hilde Bartok, or Strang could have killed Youd and Hilde, and Mac could have killed Strang. You can take any permutation you like, but there was never any memory."

"You can't be sure of that, Joe."

"Not one hundred per cent sure, but it's logical enough. It means that none of us did any killing, in fact. The real killer was something else, or should I say is something else. Something that can take possession of a human mind for a period and control the body for its own purposes. It started with you, Russ. Then it left your mind, and you had no memory of what had happened."

"I see," Farrant said thoughtfully. "You think that's what happened to all of us?"

"It looks that way. This force, power—whatever you like to call it—has been moving from one to another, waiting for the opportunity to kill without interference. MacClennon was the last victim, and that means that one of us was possessed by the thing sometime during the afternoon."

Kay said: "You obviously think that this invisible force is being used purposefully, on a definite assignment, Joe."

"Yes."

"And that assignment is to prevent the Agnes test."

Hoevler nodded jerkily. "Just so."

"Well, then, why leave things so late? Why couldn't the thing have killed off every scientist working on the project months ago?"

"After the first killing the police and the F.B.I. would have pulled out all the stops. The thing would have had to destroy Security peo-

ple, too, and lots of others only indirectly concerned."

"So the count-down was the right time, and Kaluiki the right place."

"Exactly. During the seventy-two hours of the count-down the team is isolated. To make sure that radio silence isn't broken, the thing arranges for one of us to smash the transmitter. Without any kind of outside interference it can systematically eliminate us all, one by one."

Kay pursed her lips doubtfully. "If the team is wiped out, then other teams will be trained."

"It will take time," Hoevler pointed out. "And when the next Agnes test is ready, the same thing will happen. The same conditions will apply. The same small community of experts neatly grouped so that a nearby cone can arrange for mass murder."

Farrant said glumly: "This would make more sense, Joe, if we knew why it was happening."

"But we do know why. It's a serious and so far very effective attempt to prevent the human race from acquiring the secret of anti-gravity."

"Then—who, or what, is behind it?"

"Other human beings."

Farrant shook his head in slow perplexity. "I could accept the possibility of interference from, say, some other planet. But that's assuming a helluva lot—that there are intelligent creatures on another world, that they know what's happening here on Earth, that they've mastered the technique of space flight, and that they can launch a rocket to hit a pin-point target like Kaluiki atoll over a distance of millions of miles." He considered for a moment. "It's assuming too much."

"It doesn't concern other planets, and it doesn't involve intelligent creatures anywhere else in the universe. It concerns men, here, on this planet. You're thinking in terms of space, but this has to do with time."

"Time . . ." Farrant echoed blankly.

"It has to do with a projectile travelling at more than the speed of light. Formerly that would have been impossible, but the Agnes project makes it possible. Create a field of inverse gravitation, and a projectile can accelerate to the speed of light and beyond. Remember the Lorentz-Fitzgerald contraction?"

"No, I don't," said Farrant firmly.

"Never mind," Hoevler remarked generously. "The significance of the thing is that an object travelling faster than light isn't travelling through space at all. It can't, because its physical mass becomes infinite. It is travelling through time, Russ."

"But I still don't see . . ."

"Russ," Hoevler breathed impatiently. "Will you ever see anything that can't be put over in comic strip form? The real importance of the Agnes project is something we completely overlooked. Anti-gravity isn't the end—it's the means to the end. That end is time travel. Right now it's in its crudest form. We can create a weak anti-grav field to launch a projectile, and somewhere out in space it will twist into another dimension and move along the time axis—on into the future, or back into the remote past. Decelerate, and it flips back into ordinary space again, but at a different point in time."

"I get the idea," Farrant agreed.

"But that still hasn't explained who is behind all this murder and sabotage."

"Hasn't it?" Hoevler looked surprised for a moment. "I should have thought the rest was fairly obvious. Let's suppose we live in a nicely balanced and organized society at some point in the future. Maybe five hundred years hence, maybe five thousand, maybe five million. We have a tremendous technology. We have conquered space and time. We are a happy and peaceful people living in a Utopia."

"Granted."

"Suddenly our wonderful society is invaded by people from centuries past, people who are seeking escape from the great atomic wars that are decimating mankind, people who, in a rapidly advancing technology, have achieved a break-through in the dimension we call time. Perhaps they come in hundreds and thousands, and perhaps they are aggressive and belligerent, and perhaps our own society is too small to be able to absorb or control them effectively. What to do, Russ? How to deal with these illegal immigrants from the timelines, that is the problem."

"Fascinating," Farrant murmured drily. "Atomic wars, too—or is that just a throwaway gesture?"

"Not so improbable," said Hoevler curtly. "Atomic bombs could produce atomic wars, and if that happened there are millions of people who would seek any escape route—even to the far distant future. But would our people of the future approve of a mass exodus through the centuries?"

"Well, I get the picture now," Farrant conceded. "Your parable

is intended to be fact. Sooner or later, you say, there will be an atomic war . . ."

"In the plural," Hoevler interposed.

"But if the Agnes project is developed, we shall be able to travel in space and time and gate crash the community of the future. So why not cut it off at the source by destroying time travel before it has been invented?"

"You can't work retrospectively in that way," Farrant objected. "You can't remove time travellers by destroying the technique at its beginning. Either it was developed or it wasn't, and if it wasn't then there wouldn't be any time travellers at all."

Hoevler stroked his beard amiably. "Poor Russ," he commented. "Myopic as ever in the plane of concepts. You're taking an old-fashioned view of time. Try to look at it from a four-dimensional point of view. Time becomes a tangible medium—a new projection of solid matter in a kind of space we find it hard to visualize. One can now *interfere*. One can make experiments in the time dimension. One could, for instance, make people disappear, or perform apparent miracles, or observe the past from projectiles which have infinite acceleration . . ."

"Then—this cone thing on the hill is a time projectile . . ."

"Yes. Likely it contains equipment designed to enable those scientists of the future to seize control of our minds here and now. Under the alien control we destroy each other.

"But now we understand it. We can carry a load of high explosive up the hill in the jeep. Excavate round the cone. Pack enough explosive around it to blow up a

battleship. Then light the fuse and beat it."

"That's the answer!"

"Now as to the plan. You, Russ, go over to the explosives hut in the jeep . . ."

"It's already parked over there," said Farrant.

"Good. Load up with dynamite. As much as you can carry. And don't forget the fuse."

"Okay."

"And I'll get the rest of the tackle—spades, pickaxes, and a couple of drills. You never know—we may be able to drill some sizeable holes in the shell of the thing big enough to take some dynamite, and blow it up from the inside too—just to make sure."

Hoevler, now a man of action, swung jauntily over to the door of the canteen, then stopped and looked back.

"We'll rendezvous here, just as soon as possible," he announced, then added crisply: "And get moving, Russ. You've got a lot to do."

CHAPTER 9

AFTER Hoevler had left, Russ took the revolver from his pocket, glanced at it for a reflective moment, then put it on the table in front of Kay. "You keep it," he said.

She eyed him soberly. "Why, Russ?"

"Because the thing is still with us, and Hoevler is unpredictable."

A ghost of a smile twisted the pale line of her lips. "I don't think that will happen any more—not if we work together as a team—a single-minded team."

"Take it, just the same," he said.

She slipped the gun into the side

in death, the ginger beard no longer aggressive, and the green eyes strangely vacant, almost as if utterly bored with the turn of events.

She had shot him cleanly between the eyes at close range.

Fatigue swamped Farrant in a cold enervating wave. He eased himself into a chair, and, propping his chin in his hands, stared unseeingly at the dead body of Joe Hoevler. He was not thinking, for any kind of rational thought was quite out of the question, but words and phrases and unformulated ideas were gyrating in jagged patterns across the dark void of his mind. They were meaningless, because he did not require meaning at present, but was content to sit in the state of stark trance, waiting for the shock to subside, to be absorbed in a brain that had already withstood too many shocks.

Of all the incredible happenings this was the most incredible—not because Hoevler was dead, but because Kay had killed him.

The thing was impersonal in its choice of slayer and slain, so much was obvious. The determining factor was opportunity—without interference. It had worked successfully and inevitably all along the line, and the final phase was imminent—the one fact that he could not bring himself to face. It was either Kay or himself.

Time, he thought suddenly. A million years. It wasn't Kay who killed him—it was some fiendish entity from the unguessable future, pulling the psychoneural strings that operated her body—something that had taken possession of her.

A warning voice seemed to

whisper inside the cavity of his skull. Beware, it said. She is not herself any more. She is the vehicle for some alien force. She will destroy you just as she destroyed Hoevler. She still has the gun, and you are defenseless and she may be waiting for you, the voice warned.

I'll take a chance on it, he decided. Unimaginable entity or not, she still functions within the limits of human physiology and psychology. If she seeks to kill me, it will be as a woman, with the limitations of a woman. She has two advantages—the gun, and a superior cunning which is not her own. Why wait for her to seize the initiative? What she can do, I can do. I can track her down, too, and take the gun from her, and lock her in one of the huts, out of harm's way, until the whole damned business is resolved.

He walked out of the canteen and sat in the jeep, his senses alert for the slightest sound that might signal danger. The possibilities were few enough, and clear enough. He could pursue Kay, and disarm her, but in the long run that would achieve little, and she might kill him in the process, or, alternatively, he might kill her. For the present he and she were enemies, and the barrier between them had to be acknowledged and respected. Or he could ascend the hill once more in the jeep and search Earl's clothing for the key to the explosives store, then carry out the original plan to destroy the alien cone. Those were the two alternatives; the choice should have been comparatively simple. The obvious thing to do was to ride the wild wind, move flexibly with the perversity of fate, search a cold corpse for a vital key, blow

the summit off the hill, and let Kay take care of herself. But a contrary twist in his nature rejected the obvious. Kay is in trouble, he thought. She needs help. I must find her first, and fix things so that neither of us is in danger, then I can do the big explosives act.

The jeep would be altogether too noisy, he realized, so he abandoned it and cautiously made his way to Kay's billet.

As he opened the door and went in the room exploded in an abrupt deafening crash. His left leg went berserk—twisted savagely as if gripped in a gigantic spinning wrench, then collapsed under him. He staggered forward in the darkness and plunged into something soft and resilient that doubled up at the impact and emitted an agonized gasp. Desperately he reached out and clutched at the thing in front of him. His groping fingers closed savagely on a knee.

In an instant, despite the numb encumbrance of his injured leg, he had dragged himself on top of his assailant, unable to see, but recognizing the smooth rounded shape of a woman. Kay, of course—it couldn't be anyone else. Swiftly he traced the length of her arms with his urgent fingers and found himself clutching the gun barrel. Teeth bit viciously into his wrist, but he maintained his grip, throwing his weight to one side, and, miraculously, the gun was his. He rolled over and dragged himself to the wall. Painful seconds later he was standing and the light was on.

She got up slowly with a sinuous feline motion and stood, slightly crouched, staring at him with strange inscrutable eyes.

"Kay," he said firmly. "If you can hear me, please don't worry.

I'm not going to hurt you. We both know what is happening, and whatever I do will be for the best."

No reply. Only the staring eyes.

"This thing that has taken over your mind—it will pass. But I have to make sure that you'll be safe. For your own sake I'll have to lock you up—tie you up, if necessary."

She laughed without humor. "You were lucky, Russ. In the dark I couldn't shoot straight, but it doesn't matter. In a moment it will be your turn, and you won't miss."

Deliberately he threw the gun into a corner of the room. Her eyes followed it keenly, noting its position, but she made no move to retrieve it.

"So much for prediction number one," he said. "What next?"

Her eyes remained cold and hard. She made no comment.

"I'm talking to *you*," he said forcibly. "Not to Kay—but to the thing that's taken over. You're out in the open, brother. Let's be honest about it."

"How can you be honest about something you don't understand?" she demanded. "The power is mine, and you are in no position to bargain. You can't win, whatever you do. Kill me, and I shall take possession of you and destroy you. Don't kill me, and I shall destroy you anyway. You're fighting a losing battle, Russ."

"Maybe, but at least I'm fighting . . ."

"Fighting what? You don't even know, do you?"

"Then why not tell me?" he invited.

She remained silent for a while, regarding him with an attenuated, impersonal interest. "Russ," she said presently, "if I were to tell

pocket of her skirt, where it bulged conspicuously. "Well, Russ . . ."

He went over to her and took her in his arms. "Kay, when all this is over . . ."

"I haven't dared to think about it," she whispered. "I've been so scared."

"Soon," he murmured. "Soon—we can pick up where we left off."

"I want that more than anything else in the world, Russ," she said.

He kissed her briefly. Then, releasing her, he set off at a steady pace to the dispersal point where the jeep and the explosives waited behind the blast wall. Gone was the confusion and the fear, and in its place was the exhilarating confidence of swift decisive action. At last they had got the measure of the situation—all three of them.

Pictures, he thought abruptly, I've got to have pictures—as many as I can take. Pictures of the thing in the hole, cine shots of the excavation. Lighting—that means portable color floods and batteries. A heavy load. Hoevler might crib. He'd consider dynamite the more valuable cargo, and he might be right at that. It'll have to be stills—color stills with the press camera and the electronic flash.

He decided to pick up the cameras on his return. For the moment it was more important to load the explosives. But it would have to be recorded in detail, the whole venture, and even Hoevler couldn't stop him from doing that, for, after all, that was his specific assignment on Kaluiki.

He reached the jeep, climbed in and drove across to the concrete explosives store, and there he encountered a big, unforeseen obstacle. The door was locked. Annoyed with himself for overlooking the obvious, he kicked the stout

timber of the door, but only succeeded in hurting his foot. George Earl would have had the key, of course, and it was probably still in his pocket, up there on the hill.

Angrily he walked around the small cubic building, inspecting it with his torch; the walls were of preformed concrete slabs, probably reinforced, and certainly impregnable. There were no windows. The only point of access to the interior was the door, clamped by steel lathes, secured by a big lock. He would need Hoevler's assistance.

He got back in the jeep and drove back to the camp, making a diversion to his own quarters to pick up his camera and flash equipment and was sitting in the jeep, about to start the engine, when he heard the shot. For seconds he sat motionless, as if paralyzed, striving to hold and analyze the elusive memory of the sound, not quite certain that he had heard anything at all. The silence of the night had been briefly shattered by one distant staccato explosion, not very loud, but unmistakable. The direction was anybody's guess, but logically it could only have come from one place.

Panic seized him. It had happened—Hoevler had taken the gun from her and . . . "Kay!" he said aloud, in desperation, then, in a frenzy of action, started the jeep and pulled away with a screech of tires. It seemed an eternity before he had hurled himself through the door. At first glance the room was empty.

Minutes elapsed before he found the body, and it had been behind him when he had entered, close to the door, at one side. It lay there, among the picks and spades and drills, looking small and pathetic

you, you wouldn't understand. Stick to your simple ideas. They'll serve you for as long as you have left to live."

He managed a thin smile. "Don't underestimate homo sapiens of the twentieth century. I know about you—about time travel. I know why you have come back from the future."

"Which future?" she asked.

He didn't understand the question, and said so.

It was her turn to smile. "You talk of the future as if it were a single thread of continuity stretching through multidimensional space. You're so wrong, Russ. There are many levels of time, and there are more futures than there are stars in the universe. Every future is different, but all are real."

"The future is what we make it."

"The future is what you select," she stated. "And every second of every day you are selecting, and determining the particular path along which your observing ego shall travel."

He shrugged. "You're digging too deep. Are you from the future, or aren't you?"

"Which future?" she asked again. "For that matter, what do you mean by the future? Can you conceive of another kind of time in which all the futures, all the worlds of it exist together? Can you imagine an entity which might be regarded as a guardian of the futures? A kind of temporal police, to protect humanity from itself, to protect the future from the past and vice versa?"

"No, I can't," he said.

"I warned you, Russ. Stick to your simple ideas. There is a purpose in time, and a purpose in

entropy, and a purpose in evolution. There can be no short cuts. You can't expect to leapfrog across centuries of human endeavor and hard-won progress and then blithely reap the rewards. It would be immoral, Russ."

"But not so immoral as murder."

"What is murder, Russ? Life is continuous, in the cosmic sense. One can prune a tree, but the tree continues to thrive."

"Stop talking in meaningless parables," he said firmly. "I've got one or two hunches about you. For one thing, you're not so powerful as you try to imply, temporal police or not. Sure, you can take over a human mind by some kind of remote hypnosis, but to kill a human being you've got to use the ordinary physical methods of skull-duggery and violence, just like any of us. That's not so smart. If you were really clever you could destroy by psychological means, but you can't. You need weapons and opportunity, and physically you're no stronger than the body you occupy."

Concentration modulated the featureless gaze of her eyes, and he thought he could detect the first subtle symptom of unease.

"Another thing," he went on, speaking with deliberate truculence, "you're slow. You fluffed that shot a while ago—and at point blank range. Instead of killing me you gave me a leg wound, and because Kay is a woman I was able to get the gun. The odds were on my side—still are. I could have shot Kay, but that wouldn't have destroyed you. Here we are, face to face. What can you do about it?"

No reply, but the staring eyes seemed hollower.

"Not a thing," he continued

with emphasis, "not a damned thing. If you were so omnipotent you would immediately have taken over my mind and forced me to murder Kay while I had the gun. Then you would have had me commit suicide as the final move in the game of massacre. But you can't do it, and I know why."

Suddenly the pattern of events during the past two days became clear in his mind.

He said: "You're operating within restricted and inflexible terms of reference. Your assignment is to occupy, kill and transfer—in that order. And you can't change it. I was the first. When I'd killed Earl you were able to transfer to Strang. He killed Hilde, and then you moved on to MacClennon. Mac killed Doc Youd, and that released you to take over Hoevler's mind, and he killed MacClennon. Then you took over Kay, and she killed Hoevler. What remains—to take me over again and have me murder Kay? You can't do it—because you've already occupied me once, and it won't work twice."

No reaction—just an increasing sullenness in the set of her attractive features.

"You're like a vaccine, but on a psychological plane. Once you've been injected you set up a reaction, and a kind of spiritual antibody develops. You're stuck, brother. You've got Kay and you have to stay with her until you can destroy me."

He knew what he had to do. "Kay," he said, "I'm going to tie you up and lock you in this hut. It's for your own good and mine. Later, when I've finished my task, I'll release you."

"All right," she said meekly, to his astonishment.

He went over to the bunk and pulled the top sheet out, then proceeded to tear a long strip off one edge. He was half-way through when the girl moved suddenly beyond his field of vision. He swung round just in time to catch a brief glimpse of the steel tube chair as it swung in a glistening arc through the air. He ducked in frantic reaction. The curved legs caught him on the side of the head, just about the ear, but the impact was slight, and merely rocked him a little.

She was going for the gun, but he threw himself at her legs in a clumsy tackle and together they rolled on the floor. She dragged herself away from him, remained crouching for a moment, staring at him with hostile savage eyes, then, unexpectedly ran to the door.

"Kay!" he shouted, but she had already disappeared into the night.

He pulled himself to his feet, forced himself, step by step, to the door. The night was silent and empty.

Consumed with a sense of urgency he felt his way through the darkness towards the canteen, straining to catch the slightest untoward sound, expecting any instant to hear the abrupt starting of the jeep's engine. But she probably hadn't thought of it, yet. Right now she would be planning the next offensive, perhaps watching him as he limped along—even following him. But for the moment she was unarmed, and if he could make the jeep the balance of power would shift again in his favor.

He made it. Leaning on its cold metal hood and breathing heavily, he surveyed the immediate future. There was nothing for it but to attempt to carry out the original plan, and now there was a reason-

able chance that he could break down the door of the explosives hut with the aid of one of the pickaxes which Hoevler had brought along. He took time off to go into the canteen, where, disregarding Hoevler's still body, he selected a spade, an axe and a drill. These he loaded in the jeep.

It was not until he had reached the blast wall that he remembered he had left the gun in Kay's quarters.

CHAPTER 10

THE door of the explosives hut refused to yield to repeated blows from the pickaxe, but it loosened measurably on its strong hinges so that he could shake it and feel the amount of give. In another hour, he decided, it would surrender to his attack, but there wasn't the time to spare, nor had he the energy. Returning to the jeep for a few minutes of rest, the obvious solution to the problem struck him suddenly and forcibly. He started the engine and switched on the headlamps, engaged first gear, then drove straight at the door, coming upon it at a slightly oblique angle. The crash shattered the quiet night air. Fiercely he braked, then got out to assess the profits, if any.

The door had split down the center, and had caved in about a foot, but the steel bands were still holding firm.

He tried again—and again. Third time lucky. The door broke up and fell inwards, and the front bumper of the jeep rammed the concrete surround. What the hell, he thought—that's what bumpers are for, anyway.

Using the flashlight he went into the hut. The dynamite was stacked

in small, roped, wooden crates, and they were heavier than he would have imagined. Carefully he loaded about twenty crates in the back of the jeep, then sought out a supply of slow burning fuse, and, as an afterthought, took along a reel of field telephone wire and a battery-operated detonator unit. He returned to the hut and hunted around for a revolver or rifle, but was unsuccessful in his quest. It seemed unlikely that Earl's was the only gun on the island, but if there were others then they had been carefully hidden away. Possibly they were packed in one of the many crates lining the walls and the shelves. But he found revolver ammunition, which seemed an ironic touch as he no longer had the gun. Since it was useless to him now, he left it.

There was no way of locking the door behind him, of course, and there was nothing to prevent Kay from seeking, and finding, a supply of bullets for the gun, if she so wished. That made the odds slightly more incalculable. According to his computations there were only three bullets left in the chambers of the gun, and although that was too many from his point of view, it was nevertheless comforting to know that there was, in fact, a numerical limit to potential death from that source. Now, however, he could not be certain. Best thing would be to avoid the camp so far as might be possible, and do nothing that might bring him into contact with Kay.

In the jeep he would have the supreme advantage of speed, and that would give him the edge on time. On the other hand, she has the gun, and . . . A horrific idea quivered in his mind. Suppose she should fire at the jeep as he was

driving—suppose she should explode the cargo of dynamite!

It might be, for instance, that she had anticipated his move and had decided to ambush him at some point on the long curving track to the summit of the hill, and there seemed to be little that he could do about it. Unless he could bypass the conventional route by driving over the rough ground flanking the hill to the south, and forcing the jeep up the hill from the other side. It would mean feeling the way in low gear, relying upon the one remaining headlamp to illuminate the unknown terrain. On the whole it seemed to be the most sensible plan.

He started the engine, and slowly pulled away from the explosives hut, nosing forward beyond the blast wall. Instead of turning left by the outskirts of the domestic camp, he swung the wheel right, jolting over the uneven ground towards a part of the island that was as yet largely unexplored. He was perspiring; his hands were steady enough, however, and there was more strength in the aching leg as it operated the clutch pedal.

Two miles further on the ground rose sharply in a series of volcanic ridges where a spur of the hill curved down to the ocean, and here the going became particularly difficult. When the engine of the jeep stalled for the fourth time, he realized that he couldn't make it after all. Ahead was an undulating gradient of about one in three split half way by a narrow chasm, and it became obvious that any further progress in this direction was out of the question.

Tired and dispirited he swung the jeep round and retraced his path. The dark, deserted camp crept by on his right, and present-

ly he was ascending the worn twisting track up the side of the hill.

He stopped the jeep where the track terminated, close to the trees, and sat for a while, smoking a cigarette and thinking. Two things were obvious. First, the thing inside Kay would make desperate efforts to accomplish its mission before zero—second, it was therefore more than ever necessary to blow the thing up at the earliest possible moment. That way Kay would be released from the spell that held her and the cone device would be wrecked beyond return, and Security would still be able to examine the fragments.

He knew the most difficult part was to come: virtually one-legged he would have to drag the boxes of dynamite through the jungle to the site of the crater, a distance of some two miles or more. That might mean four or five journeys. Then there was the digging to be done, and the drilling, and the laying of the dynamite charges and the fuse. There was no time to waste.

Sighing wearily, and fighting the exhaustion that was draining the energy from his limbs, he climbed out of the jeep. The move could not have been better timed. He saw the flash from the corner of his eye long before he heard the crack of the revolver, and dived out of the vehicle. The second shot was swamped in thunder as the entire summit of the hill seemed to burst into orange incandescence, heaving upwards and outwards in a tremendous surge. He stopped rolling and lay face down in the dirt, as the shattered hill began to fall upon him, battering his body. Suddenly it was all over. He lay for a while, half buried be-

neath loose soil and rock, savouring the kinaesthetic sensation of life in his body. Looking around slowly he saw a mass of twisted metal lying angularly in a shallow smouldering crater some seven or eight yards away. Good-bye to the jeep. One problem at least had been irrevocably settled, and the cone had had a last-minute reprieve.

It seemed likely that Kay had come straight to the hill, after collecting the gun. That would be her task now, of course: to patrol the summit and protect the cone device, knowing that sooner or later he would attempt to destroy it. There had been two shots, which meant that there was one bullet left in the revolver, unless she had acquired further ammunition from the explosives store. Even so, one bullet could be one too many for Russ.

If I stay here, sooner or later she'll find me. My best chance is to pull out. Chances are she'll stay on the hill, close to the cone thing, just in case I make another attempt to destroy it. On the other hand, if I go back to the camp she may follow me anyway. It's a calculated risk, and the survival odds will be better down below.

Warily, with immense care, he crawled along the vegetation-strewn ground, making his way inches at a time towards the open downward slopes of the hill.

Back in the camp he stood for a long time watching the dark, distant hill, straining his eyes to detect the slightest sign of movement. Eventually, satisfied that he had not been immediately followed, he returned to his own quarters, and blacked-out the shuttered window with folded blankets before switch-

ing on the light. Slowly, with trembling fingers, he lit a cigarette.

Next he removed his trousers and washed the blood from his wounded leg, then tore up a clean shirt to make an improvised bandage, binding it firmly so that his leg felt supported. Dressing again in new slacks he was aware of an appreciable improvement in his morale. He switched off the light and peered through the slats of the shutter across the window, but the road outside was silent and deserted.

Putting the light on again, he sat on the bunk and took time off to think. Let's keep it simple, he told himself. Let's keep it in one's and two's—that way it might add up to make some kind of acceptable sense.

I'm *not* a scientist, he insisted, pursuing the trend of his thinking, so from a technological point of view it wouldn't matter whether I survived or not. On the other hand, the thing probably wouldn't want any witnesses left behind. Better to leave the massacre as a fantastic mystery without explanation.

But the thing was not omnipotent. It had to operate via the sluggish responses of an alien body—Kay's body. What if he managed to elude her for the rest of the night? What if, in the end, the thing had to give up and let him survive? What would happen to Kay? She was a scientist in her own right, and she knew a great deal about the Agnes project. It seemed highly improbable that she would be allowed to survive.

He groaned quietly and rubbed his eyes. No point in debating further: he had to destroy the thing before it destroyed Kay, and perhaps himself, too. Here and now,

without delay. It would take the rest of the night, but it had to be done. It would demand more energy than he could muster, but it still had to be done. Reluctantly he stood up and, switching off the light, made his way to the door.

The camp was dead in the moonlight. Slowly he dragged himself past the empty huts, heading towards the distant explosives store.

An eternity later, it seemed, he reached the small concrete hut with the smashed wooden door.

Selecting his load of high explosive proved to be an almost impossible task. He worked in total darkness, choosing the wooden crates by touch, then carrying them beyond the door into the open where he was able to confirm their contents in the pale moonlight. There was obviously a limit to the load he could carry, and that limit proved to be four crates of dynamite. He roped them together, looping the ends of the rope into shoulder slings, and, with great difficulty, hoisted them on to his back. He stuffed a suitable length of slow-burning fuse in his pocket.

Without the jeep he was no longer hampered by the terrain, and he decided to ascend by the shortest and most direct route, avoiding the established track, and simply climbing in the straightest possible line towards the summit. The going was easy enough at first, but his leg troubled him, and as the slope became steeper pain and fatigue began to worry him. He kept moving, biting his lower lip in stubborn doggedness. The dynamite boxes kept swinging and shifting as he moved, and the thin rope slings cut through his jacket and shirt into the bones of his shoulder until he was certain that he was supporting the weight of

the explosive on raw severed flesh. But he didn't stop. He sensed that if he stopped he would never resume.

He directed all thought and concentration on the physical effort of the climb, the contraction of muscles and the elevation of bones against the pull of gravity. Speed—about one mile per hour. Maybe less—much less. On and on throughout the long cool hours of the night.

He was already among the trees before he realized that he had reached the summit, and caution quenched his tired careless movements like a cold shower. He wanted to stop, but didn't dare. Consumed by fatigue and pain he continued to walk on through the trees as the dawn began to break. This is the final day of the count-down, he told himself in an effort to keep awake, and to keep sane. Operational zero. Noon—but advanced by how many hours—to what purpose? Zero minus what? Minus six human beings. That was the real count-down—in terms of human lives. Eight people, seven, six, five, four, three, two to go.

He struggled on, not quite certain as to his direction, but watching half-heartedly for a familiar landmark or configuration of terrain and jungle that would lead him to the site of the thing—the cone from a future yet unborn.

It was in this abstracted frame of mind that he stepped beyond a tall thicket and found himself face to face with Kay.

CHAPTER 11

HER face was white. Strain was etched around her eyes. Her fingers were trembling, and she was not yet holding the trigger.

There was no recognition in her eyes. Kay's body—but not Kay. And it came to Farrant that she was on the verge of collapse. A shell, an automaton—a puppet waiting for the peremptory pull on the strings. At all events—still waiting.

Quickly he slipped the dynamite load from his back, allowing it to strike the ground with unintended force. They eyed each other for an eternity of two seconds.

Carefully he moved away from the crates of explosive. Her eyes were fixed on his, without recognition or reaction, and in a moment she began to raise the gun. It was a ballet in slow motion. Surprise registered distinctly in his brain. There are limits, he realized—the thing is weighed down by the restrictions of human flesh and physiology. Kay is exhausted, and the thing inside her can only operate within the boundaries of that exhaustion.

Rapidly he assessed the possibilities of the immediate future. The barrel was level now, and pointing towards his heart. He clenched his fist and swung his arm.

The click of her teeth under the impact of the blow seemed to resonate in his brain. She rocked backwards, and he went after her, reaching for the gun. Surprisingly she swung around, away from him, so that he was only able to seize her waist ineffectually; a moment later her leg flashed backwards and the hard heel of her shoe crashed into his wounded thigh. He collapsed abruptly, his consciousness almost obliterated with acute pain, but an instant later he recovered his presence of mind and clawed at her ankles. She fell heavily. Relaxing, he seized her arms and kissed her.

"Kay," he said urgently. "Kay—this is Russ. Listen to me. Pull yourself together . . ."

He tried to kiss her again, but she bit his mouth savagely, drawing blood from his lower lip. Fool, he told himself—what do you think you're playing at? This is no game—this is the prelude to cold murder.

With a feeling of horror, he bunched his fist and struck her on the jaw, again and again, until he felt her body sag limply across his.

He thrust her body aside, and crawled around on all fours in search of the gun, but it was not visible. Frustrated, he stood up, holding on to the jagged limb of a tree for support. Somewhere among the coarse grass and sparsely clumped vegetation was the gleaming metallic shape of the gun, and it was essential that he should find it—but in the semi-daylight it eluded the desperate scanning of his tired eyes. I saw it fall, he told himself: it rolled a little, obliquely, not more than a few feet—it must be here, within a small circumscribed area. But that was before we struggled—before we heaved our bodies across the green and brown floor of the jungle.

Frantically he cast about, but the revolver remained hidden, and he gave up. Disarmed, Kay was no longer a potential danger. He decided to leave her where she lay and concentrate on the remainder of his program.

He knelt down and pushed the rope slings of the dynamite crates on to his raw shoulders, then struggled to his feet and painfully walked away, forcing his legs into step after step, abandoning Kay where she lay. She was safe enough for the moment.

He stumbled on in search of a four-foot circle of rough ground.

A curious object was hanging from the branch of a stunted tree. A moment later he recognized the thing as one of his cameras, and with the recognition came memory—he had indeed left a camera behind on the last visit to the site of the cone device and Earl's grave. It was a landmark—more than that, a tombstone.

He came upon the crater within seconds: the loose mound of soil excavated with his bare hands, the curiously distorted body of George Earl and the shining metallic object in the vast cavity. Horror penetrated the weariness that lay across his mind. He slipped the dynamite load to the ground, then recovered the camera.

He judged the light and set the lens and aperture accordingly, making due allowance for the slow speed of the color film in the camera. The frame counter showed eleven shots still unexposed. Enough, he decided. He used six of them in photographing the immediate scene—Earl, the crater, and the thing still buried deep in the ground. Then, discarding the camera, he set to work on a deliberate program of excavation.

The thing was bigger than he had anticipated. As the sun rose incandescently into the cloudless sky he found himself some ten feet below ground level, and still the thing was buried, though how much further he had no way of knowing. It was vaguely cylindrical in shape, below the coned tip, but cylindrical in a curious twisted way, like a rocket that had been melted in a furnace, losing its rigidity and melting into something quite non-functional in terms

of ordinary ballistics. But, he reminded himself, this was not a space projectile—according to the late Hoevler this was a missile designed to travel at unimaginable speed through a distorted kind of space that traversed time itself. Perhaps the shape of the thing was determined by mathematical functions of some kind of hyperspace—time streamlining, if you liked.

At this point he paused to take more photographs. Scientists would in due course pronounce their own interpretations of the physical aspects of the thing. At all events he was carrying out his assigned task—to make a record of whatever was worth recording during the Kaluiki count-down.

He stepped out of the pit to survey the overall results of his efforts. Deep enough, he thought. The thing can't go down much further. A ring of dynamite charges positioned around the periphery of the shining hull should do the trick. Tamped into the ground, of course, to heighten the destructive blast. Drilling would probably help, but there wasn't time, and that plated metal didn't look amenable to an ordinary twist drill, anyway. It would probably take a high-speed diamond cutter, or ultrasonics, to make any impression on it.

Carefully he unpacked the sticks of dynamite, grouping them in clumps of four with a common detonator, and attaching lengths of fuse. This was fiddly work: his fingers were clumsy and unresponsive, but in the end he achieved his purpose. With the spade he dug a ring of cavities around the time projectile and packed the dynamite in, stamping the dry earth into place, but taking care not to dislodge the fuse. When he had fin-

ished there were about a dozen lengths of fuse snaking over the ground like yellow cord. He joined the fuse ends together, attaching a single long length which he trailed out of the pit into the spiked grass beneath the trees. Then, relaxing for a moment, he lit a cigarette. Three seconds later, after inhaling deeply, he ignited the end of the fuse. There was at least a minute.

He exposed three more frames of color film, then, slinging the camera around his neck, turned his back on the pit and made his way through the trees. Thirty seconds to go—plus or minus the odd fragment of time.

One final glance round before hurrying into a declivity to shelter from the imminent blast, and, instantly—frantic alarm and transient paralysis. Kay was there, balancing on the edge of the pit, holding the revolver in her right hand. A moment later she was climbing down into the hollow, to where the burning fuse spluttered over its last few feet. He knew what she was going to do.

"No . . ." he breathed incredulously, then, louder: "No!" He began to hurry back to the pit. "Kay!" he shouted as he drew near. "Kay!"

And then he was at the edge of the crater, half kneeling, supporting himself on one hand. And the girl was looking up at him, half smiling, as if to say, "This is the end, Russ. I've won, and there's nothing you can do about it." She was holding the length of yellow fuse in one hand, but it was still burning actively. In the other hand was the gun, and as he stared she raised it steadily.

Defeated and desolated, he waited for the quick flash from the

barrel and the staccato crack that would precede the impact of the bullet, but it did not come immediately. Suddenly he realized that she was not even looking at him, for her attention was directed elsewhere, and at the same moment he became aware of a strange sound throbbing in the air—a pulsing feathery sound, as of machinery and wind, out of key and out of context. Now she was looking up into the sky, and he did the same. There was nothing to see—not until he turned round—and then, unbelievably, there it was, above the trees, distant enough but quite unmistakable—the helicopter.

His next movements were reflex. He spun on one leg and flung himself into the pit. She thrust herself against him, forcing him backwards so that he stumbled and fell, and then she was standing over him, holding the gun by its barrel, arm upraised. In a final wild sweeping glance he saw that the fuse had already burned back to the junction, and the sputtering fire was creeping underground towards the ring of dynamite charges.

The blow never came. She was still standing over him with upraised arm, and the reversed gun glinted ominously against the sky, but something had gone out of her face, some subtlety of expression, of purposefulness. His mind spun to comprehend the blankness, the bewilderment, in her eyes. A wind sighed and swirled suddenly in the crater, and, looking beyond her, he observed that the shining projectile had gone. Only a clean circular hole like a shaft cut into the ground indicated that it had ever existed.

An alarm bell sounded stridently

and urgently in his brain. Quickly he pushed himself to his feet and grabbed her arm. Not understanding, but allowing herself to be pulled along, she followed him out of the crater, and somewhere along the way she dropped the empty revolver.

His mind was obsessed by the image of a dozen burning fuses. Inches to go—perhaps less. Beyond the first tree he flung the girl to the ground then lay flat across her, and waited.

"Russ . . ." she murmured, but he put his fingers across her mouth.

The final seconds of silence lasted for a thousand years, it seemed. He could hear the sound of her breathing, and the pounding of his own heart, and the keen vibrant noise of the remote helicopter. I'm not counting the seconds, he thought irrelevantly, I'm counting in smaller units—in hundredths of a second—even less.

The explosion, when it came, was not so terrifying as he had imagined it would be. The noise seemed to be swamped by the concussive shaking of the ground and his own body. A vast black shadow hurled itself across the sky and the trees reflected bright orange flame. Neither of them felt the debris when it began to fall . . .

I know you, Farrant thought idly. I recognize that fair wavy hair and that too pink boyish complexion, and the uniform is familiar. It must have been a century ago when we last met, and I'm damned if I can remember your name. But hello, anyway, stranger.

Lieutenant Frieberg shook Farrant's shoulder. "You conscious?" he asked.

Farrant managed a nod. The

room was familiar. In due course he identified it as the small sick bay adjoining Doc Youd's surgery.

"You're lucky," Frieberg commented laconically. "You couldn't have gotten nearer to that explosion if you'd tried." Then, after a pause: "Well, relax, anyway. You're going to have to do a whole lot of explaining . . ."

"Kay?" Farrant asked weakly.

"Right next door," Frieberg said, inclining his head. Farrant glanced to his right. She was lying on the next bed, still unconscious.

"Is she—all right?"

"Exhaustion mainly, I think."

"What's happening now, Lieutenant . . .?"

Frieberg waved an arm around the room. "This is a temporary set-up. I've sent Sergeant Gant back to the carrier in the 'copter. In just no time at all this place will be swarming with Security and brass hats."

"Did you . . . find the others?" Farrant asked quietly.

"The hell I did. Where are they all, Farrant?"

"Mainly in the canteen."

"Doing what?" Frieberg took his arm to support him.

"They're all dead—except Kay and me. Good thing you came when you did, though you left it a bit late."

"Now wait a minute, Farrant. Are you crazy? Do you know what you're saying?"

"They're dead," Farrant repeated flatly. "What brought you here anyway? The radio cabin is wrecked."

"We picked up a big explosion from the island an hour or so before dawn. Thought it might be trouble with the reactor, so Gant and I were ordered to fly over

and . . ." Friberg broke off suddenly. "If they're dead," he said in a voice that implied disbelief, "then who killed them?"

"That is the difficult part," said Farrant wearily. "If you don't mind I'd rather try to explain to the brass hats when they arrive."

"Was—was it *you*, Farrant?" asked Friberg in a phantom voice, his eyes widening a little.

Farrant shook his head slowly. "Nothing so simple. What's the time?"

Friberg referred to his wristwatch. "Just after eleven-ten."

"Almost zero."

"In theory. Tell me—where *are* the others?"

"Hoevler's on the canteen floor, and the rest in the deep-freeze store. Except MacClennon. He's on the catwalk in the reactor room. And Earl's been blown to pieces—what was left of his corpse."

Friberg's face was a dark, incredulous mask. He moved towards the door. "You stay here, Farrant. I'm going to check up . . ." An instant later he had gone.

Farrant did some slow mental computing. He had an hour—maybe two. There was still time to do what had to be done before officialdom intervened.

He leaned over Kay and shook her gently but persistently until she stirred and opened her eyes.

"Kay," he said urgently. "Kay."

"Russ . . ." she whispered. "Then it's . . ." A transient look of bewilderment in her hazel eyes. "Darling—what's happened . . . ?"

"You wouldn't remember. Don't worry about it, anyway. We've got work to do."

"Where's Joe?"

"I'm afraid he's dead."

A fleeting expression of alarm

and horror. "But, Russ—that means . . ."

"No," he stated firmly. "We're all innocent of murder—all of us—the dead and the living. The true killer managed to pull out just before we exploded the dynamite charges."

"You mean—the cone?"

"Yes. We failed. We would probably have failed, whatever happened. It disappeared, with seconds to spare." He paused reflectively. "On the other hand, it failed too. It returned to wherever it came from, mission not completed."

"Then—it will return?"

"Could be. As I see it there's only one thing that can prevent it. That's to finish the count-down as planned and launch the Agnes rocket. After that I don't think there'll be any further interference."

She rolled painfully off the bed, and he helped her to stand erect. "How do you feel?" he asked.

"Awful," she replied, smiling faintly. "But game."

He kissed her quickly but gently on her lips. "Then let's not waste time, honey. You take the reactor and I'll check on the rocket. I'll ring you from the launching pad."

"All right, Russ. But I can't handle the reactors and the radar monitors, too . . ."

"Let's forget about the monitors. The important thing is to get the rocket launched, for better or for worse."

She nodded agreement, and they went out into the morning sunlight.

"Russ," she said, "wouldn't it be better to wait until the others arrive on the island?"

"Friberg is already here."

She looked at him in surprise,

then recollection flashed in her eyes. "The helicopter . . ."

"Yes. And perhaps in half-an-hour others will arrive, and you know what will happen then. They'll cancel the entire project while they investigate the general mayhem. Then the next time they try to do an anti-gravity test there will be another buried cone—and so it will go on."

"Yes, you're right," she said solemnly after a pause.

They separated just beyond the lagoon. Kay walked towards the reactor block while Farrant made his way towards the rocket.

The ghost of Joe Hoevler seemed to be whispering in every metallic echo that reverberated inside the hollow shell of the projectile. The atmosphere was unreal and other-worldly, so much so that Farrant found himself glancing warily around from time to time, imagining swift bat-like movements in the deeper shadows beyond the girders and dural buttresses. His job was routine enough: months ago on that emergency stand-in course they had taught him the basic count-down drill, though he had never imagined he would need to put his knowledge to practical use. The drill returned sluggishly into his memory, but in the course of time he switched on the necessary circuits and checked the warning pilot lights, and heard the smooth humming of the equipment as it took up the electronic load.

It was doubtful whether all of the ancillary apparatus such as the radar trajectory beacons and data instrumentation was fully operational, but it was no longer important. So long as the anti-grav devices worked first time, then the rest could be accomplish-

ed next time, if there ever was a next time.

Satisfied, though not exultant, he climbed out of the rocket, sealing the service port, and descended the gantry in the elevator. From a concrete observation post near to the launching pad he rang the reactor room on the internal line.

"That you, Farrant?" said Frieberg's crisp voice.

Farrant groaned mentally. Damn Frieberg. Interference at this point was intolerable, but he had to acknowledge the call.

"Speaking," he said. "Let me talk to Kay."

Frieberg's voice was hard and stony. "Nothing doing. The count-down is off."

"Don't be a fool, Lieutenant . . ."

"Look, Farrant—right now the technical side doesn't matter. There are six people dead and you've got a deal of explaining to do. Better come over here right away."

Farrant hesitated, then made up his mind. "Okay. I'll be right over."

He set out on the tiring walk to the reactor block, hurrying his aching feet, not thinking very much about the situation, but aware of a bleak tightness in his mind. Of all the lousy luck—to have Frieberg upset things at this stage. But there was nothing to be done other than take the jumps as they came. At all events the rocket was ready to go. Everything depended on the reactor.

Frieberg was pacing the reactor room as if on guard patrol, while Kay sat passively at the control console. They both stared at Farrant as he entered—Kay with hopeful speculation, Frieberg with

restrained truculence. The pacing stopped.

Farrant went over to the girl.

"Did you have time to check, Kay?"

"Yes." Her voice was little more than a whisper. "You remember MacClennon tried to speed up the reactor count-down. Well, he cut about two hours. It's already higher than critical level."

"Farrant!" called Frieberg sharply.

Farrant ignored the lieutenant. "Does that mean we're ready to go?"

"Dangerously so, Russ. We might burn out the energy converters."

"Can we take that risk?"

"I don't know."

"What's the alternative, Kay?"

"To cut back the reactor banks—let it cool down for a couple of hours . . ." Her eyes were looking beyond him, and he sensed the warning in them. It was now or never.

He swung round as Frieberg reached out to grasp his shoulder. There was anger in the younger man's pale eyes.

"Farrant—I'm talking to *you*. The count-down is *off*. And pending investigation I'm putting you under arrest."

"The hell you are," Farrant said softly.

"Now I don't want to have to get tough," said Frieberg, unbuttoning the leather holster of his revolver.

"I wish I could say the same," Farrant breathed. He swung his fist with all the energy he could muster. The lieutenant's jaw clicked hollowly. As he staggered back Farrant followed up the assault, and in a moment the other man lay sprawled on the floor,

frosty eyed. Farrant took possession of the gun.

He turned to Kay. "This is operational zero, honey. Give it the works, come heaven or hell."

CHAPTER 12

FROM the entrance to the reactor block they were able to watch the launching. Time ran out quickly into the final seconds of the count-down. Glancing at his watch Farrant made an approximation, mentally checking off the numerals—five, four, three, two, one—and zero was now.

Nothing happened. The distant rocket stood silently poised in the enmeshing gantry, reflecting the harsh glare of the morning sun. His timing was out, he concluded. It had been impracticable to start the mechanical count-off relay signal, so that there was no precise way of knowing exactly when zero would occur.

They waited arm-in-arm, watching the monochrome pattern of the remote launching. Now there was a curious low-pitched hum resonating in the air, like the throb of an immense dynamo buried deep in the ground, and it seemed to him that the silver shell of the rocket was brighter, as if developing an inherent luminescence.

The door behind them crashed open suddenly. They turned round to see Lieutenant Frieberg. He advanced like a runaway tank, and when he was within striking range his right arm swung wildly. Farrant dodged the blow, helping the other man to follow-through on his swing with an accurately timed push. Then he caught his left arm from behind and a moment later they were both flat on the hot dusty ground. Frieberg

rolled over, heaving his body across Farrant's, then took a stranglehold. He was about to apply the full weight of his body to the grip when the air about them seemed to burst into sullen vibrant thunder. In the same instant the girl's excited voice rang in their ears.

"Russ—the rocket . . ."

It was as if a film director had shouted, "Cut!" Maintaining their relative positions they looked towards the launching pad and saw blue fire. The fire was a diffuse glowing aura surrounding the rocket and the gantry, growing brighter until the sunlight itself looked yellow and sallow in contrast. And inside the incandescent blue sphere the slender shape of the rocket took on a twisted distorted aspect. And then the fire burst into an immeasurably brief peak of brilliance—like a photo-flash—and the throbbing thunder stopped abruptly.

Farrant found himself temporarily blinded. Vision was obliterated by a dense yellow cloud that hovered fugitively in front of his eyes—the reaction from the intense blue flash. It occurred to him in a moment of lucidity that Frieberg would be similarly handicapped, so, not hesitating to seize the initiative, he twisted his body violently to one side, unseating the other man, then rolled over and pushed himself to his feet.

Something moved in the yellow fog. He reached out and found himself touching Kay's arm, and at the contact she came closer to him.

"Is that you, Russ?" she asked. "Something's happened to my eyes."

"Me, too," he said.

"Hey, Farrant!" came Frie-

berg's voice, no longer truculent, but perplexed. "Farrant—where are you? What goes on?"

"It's all right," said Farrant. "We're all dazzled, but it'll pass."

"What happened?"

"I guess the rocket blew up," Farrant said uncertainly.

"You mean you blew it up. What's your game, Farrant? Sabotage?"

The fog was beginning to clear now. He could see the tall shape of Frieberg fiercely rubbing his eyes, and Kay looking towards the launching pad.

"Lieutenant," she said quietly, "there's no question of sabotage. Russ and I completed the count-down, that's all, but things worked out differently from what we expected."

And now Frieberg was peering towards the launching zone, too. Farrant found himself intrigued by the increasing bewilderment in the other man's face. The fog had cleared, so he turned to see what Kay and Frieberg could see stretched before them.

There was nothing. The rocket and the gantry and most of the equipment in the immediate vicinity had vanished, and the area was level, as if the launching pad had never been. There was still, it seemed to him, a certain subtle luminescence hovering in the air where the rocket had been—a kind of indefinable scintillation in space, modulating the blue-white of the sky.

"Not a thing left," Frieberg breathed incredulously. "Not a damn thing."

He could think of no possible explanation. It couldn't have been an explosion in the ordinary sense. There had been no detonation, and no blast.

"What do you think, Kay?" he asked.

She shook her head. "I haven't had time to think at all. But I've got a feeling . . ."

"Well?"

"Let me put it this way, Russ. The Agnes project has worked, but in a way we couldn't have imagined. We've uncovered something very strange—the very thing they tried to stop us from finding out . . ."

"You mean—what we have just witnessed is the reason why Strang and the others were killed?"

"I think so, Russ."

"Let's hear more about the killing of Strang and the others," Frieberg said firmly.

Farrant said, "There'll be an inquiry in due course, and those concerned will dig out the truth."

Frieberg scowled. "The island is full of dead bodies."

"The real killer has gone—perhaps for all time."

"Gone where?"

Kay said: "Gone where the Agnes rocket went."

Frieberg stared at her blankly.

"But don't ask me how or why, Lieutenant. I'm still trying to add it all up. You saw the Agnes count-down successfully accomplished, but something came to this island to try to prevent it, and that something destroyed every member of the team except Russ and me. I think it would have got us too if Russ hadn't taken a grip on the situation."

"I don't get it," Frieberg complained. "I'm damned if the count-down was successful. The rocket exploded on take-off, if you ask me. And nothing could have come to this island, or left it again—that wouldn't be possible."

"Nevertheless—that's what hap-

pened. The explanation is . . ." She broke off and turned, looking into the northern sky.

The others heard the sound, too—a faint steady droning from afar, and they searched the sky with their eyes. Frieberg was the first to see it, for he was accustomed to such recognition.

"The helicopter," he announced triumphantly. "That'll be Sergeant Gant with one of the top brass. Now we'll get the truth."

Farrant caught Kay's eye: they exchanged ironic smiles.

"And if you don't mind, Farrant," Frieberg went on, "I'll have my revolver back."

"Sorry," Farrant murmured. He returned the gun to the lieutenant.

Eight minutes later the helicopter settled down on the concrete landing ground beyond the obliterated launching pad, and at the same time the silhouette of a destroyer crept over the thin line of the curved horizon.

They held the preliminary investigation in the canteen, in the late afternoon, after Hoevler's body had been removed, and after the contents of the deep freeze locker had been transferred to the destroyer. Kaluiki had, in effect, been invaded and occupied by the Navy, and the young men in white tropical uniform were everywhere. In the canteen they moved the small tables into the shape of a solid horseshoe, and around four o'clock eight officers of Naval and Army rank sat around the outer periphery of the crescent, equipped with pencils and note pads. In charge of the summary inquiry was tall, gray-haired Colonel Daker, chief of Security in the Kaluiki operational zone.

They interrogated Kay first,

questioning her for nearly two hours, and minutely recording her evidence. Then they called in Farrant. He found himself sitting in the center of the horseshoe, surrounded by what was commonly known as top brass, but the atmosphere was cordial enough.

Colonel Daker said: "This is in the nature of a formal investigation, Farrant, but strictly informal, if you see what I mean."

"Not exactly," said Farrant.

"Well, we are acting without specific authorization from Washington and London, but we are acting, none the less. We are taking the inevitable and logical first step in what looks like being one of the biggest and most controversial investigations in all military history."

Farrant nodded, but made no comment.

"In a sense, Farrant, we are anticipating the kind of official action that will be demanded at a later stage. The more we can put on record now, the easier it may be for you and Miss Kinley in due course."

"I'll tell you all I can," Farrant said.

The colonel referred to his notes. "Miss Kinley has already made a long and comprehensive statement, but I must confess that the overall substance of it, to my mind, adds up to sheer fantasy. On the other hand, Miss Kinley is a scientist of considerable integrity, and we should be most reluctant to discount anything she has said—with or without corroboration."

"You want me to provide corroboration?" Farrant asked.

Daker leaned forward massively, transfixing Farrant with cold, keen eyes. "We want you to tell the story of the count-down in

your own words. Omit nothing. Every detail is important."

"I can do better than that," Farrant said with quiet confidence. "I can support my statement with irrefutable evidence. I have color photographs to prove what you might think to be—sheer fantasy."

"Can you produce them?"

"I can produce some, but the majority are exposed negatives awaiting processing."

"In that case I'd be obliged if you would hand over to me all exposed photographic film, processed or not. I'll have it rushed to base and dealt with on a priority basis. Will you get them?"

"All right, Colonel—I'll do that."

"And now," said Daker. "Let's start at zero minus seventy-two."

Farrant told the whole story as he remembered it, omitting nothing.

When he had finished talking, Daker said: "I take it you have photographs showing this cone-shaped metallic object, Farrant?"

"Yes."

"Good. Without them your evidence, and, indeed, Miss Kinley's, would be rather difficult to accept. That is hard to believe."

"Well, thank you, Colonel," Farrant said with faint irony.

"The terms of reference of this Court of Inquiry are simply to collect evidence to show, from minute to minute, so far as is possible, exactly what happened during the count-down. We are concerned only with matters of fact, and matters of observation. Naturally we welcome any kind of material corroboration, and I personally commend you on having the presence of mind to take photographs. They may well prove to be the foundation stone which will support both

your evidence and that of Miss Kinley."

Farrant said nothing. Better, he thought, to let the colonel do the talking.

"You allege," Daker went on, "that some undefined entity from the future—I believe you said the future . . . ?"

"Hoevler was the first to suggest it," Farrant said. "Later we had to admit that he was almost certainly right."

"Very well. An entity from the future sought to interfere with the count-down and destroy the Kaluiki team by some kind of psychological possession. As to motive, you suggest that the actual moment of launching of the Agnes rocket would—and did—reveal some unsuspected scientific truth of vital importance, and that the entity from the future was, in fact, assigned to prevent that very discovery."

"That is substantially true," Farrant conceded.

"At the instant of operational zero, according to your statement, the rocket simply vanished."

"Yes, Colonel."

"Not only the rocket, but the gantry and a substantial quantity of ancillary equipment falling within the electrostatic field in the vicinity of the launching pad."

"That is so."

Daker considered his words carefully. "Did you see the rocket move at all?"

"No."

"There was no approximation to a conventional take off?"

"None whatever."

The colonel referred again to his notes. "According to Miss Kinley the rocket could not possibly have moved in space. On the other hand, to have moved in time would have

required an almost instantaneous acceleration to something beyond the speed of light."

Farrant shrugged. "You're going over my head, Colonel. I never did understand this Lorentz-Fitzgerald business."

"You're in good company," Daker said wryly. "However, the fact remains that the rocket disappeared—if not into space, then where?"

"I wouldn't know."

"It doesn't matter. As from tomorrow experts will inspect every inch of the island, and run fine-toothed combs over what's left of the launching pad. They'll find the answers. Meanwhile . . ." He paused, eyeing Farrant reflectively.

"I take it Miss Kinley and I are more or less under arrest?"

Daker pursed his lips, then licked them with the tip of his pink tongue. "Arrest is a harsh word," he said quietly. "Much better to regard yourselves as important witnesses under special Security surveillance. Tonight you will be accommodated aboard the destroyer, and tomorrow—well, we shall see. I imagine you will be flown back to Washington on a top priority ticket."

"Whatever you say," said Farrant.

"Fine. For the moment all I want you to do is hand over all the photographic material in your possession. Later, when your statement has been transcribed, I'd like your signature."

"Certainly."

Daker stood up with an air of finality. "Excellent. You may go, Farrant. You'd better spend your time packing. You may be transferred to the destroyer any time at all."

He went immediately to Kay's quarters. "How did it go, Russ?" she asked.

"Comme ça, comme ça. The photographs will clinch matters. I can't blame the colonel for being skeptical."

"What's going to happen to us?"

"Apparently we spend the night on the destroyer, and tomorrow we fly to Washington."

She smiled. "I think I'll like that. Pacific islands are fine—in moderation."

"Kay," he murmured, taking her hand, "you and me . . ."

She nodded, understanding. "We had a raw deal, Russ. Fate certainly wasn't on our side."

"We can start all over."

"That's what I was hoping you'd say."

"Back in civilization, where we can have fun, and do things in style."

"Count me in. I'm in favor of fun."

"I haven't got photographs to prove it," Farrant said, "but I love you, Kay."

She regarded him solemnly. "Without photographs, how can you expect me to believe you, Russ?"

"You sound like Colonel Daker."

"And you talk too much. Kiss me."

He complied.

Presently he said: "In the last analysis, Kay—what does it all add up to?"

"That we love each other."

"I meant the rocket—the end of the count-down."

She sighed and turned away from him. "I wish I knew. I abhor a mystery. In science there is always an explanation for the inexplicable. And yet . . ."

"I didn't see the rocket at the instant of zero," Farrant said. "I was mixing it with Lieutenant Frieberg. What happened exactly?"

"Difficult to say, Russ. A flash of incredible brilliance. A kind of twisting of the shape of the rocket behind the blue haze—and then nothing."

"Let's suppose that the test was successful. Let's assume that at zero an anti-gravity field was established. Can you reconcile that with what actually happened?"

She sighed abstractedly. "I've thought and thought about it, Russ. I've tried to equate it all against Einstein and Lorentz-Fitzgerald. Candidly, I got nowhere fast. We seem to have come upon some kind of extra-physics—maybe dimensional physics. At all events—something that conflicts with terrestrial physics as we know it."

Farrant thought deeply for a moment, then said vaguely: "Kay—how could a projectile achieve the speed of light without moving?"

"It couldn't," she declared flatly. "On the other hand, that's what happened, if one can believe one's senses."

"I was wondering," he said. "When I was at school I was pretty good in physics and mechanics, and . . ." He hesitated, making a gesture of disparagement with his hands. "It doesn't matter."

"Tell me, Russ," she insisted. "What did you have in mind?"

"Well—looking at the anti-gravity project in the simplest possible terms, it occurred to me that the whole purpose of the project was to render the Agnes rocket weightless—that is, in the first instance,

under conditions of neutral or zero gravity."

She nodded. "That was the general idea, Russ."

"Okay. Supposing it succeeded—supposing the rocket became weightless. I always understood that a weightless object possessed no mass and no inertia."

He considered his words for a moment. "In that case . . ." His voice tailed off as he pursued the elusive idea through the labrynth of his mind. "If you apply a force to a weightless object, with zero inertia, surely you get an infinite acceleration."

She blinked at him, not fully understanding, her thoughts running introspectively in a compulsive groove. "That's right. Zero inertia means infinite acceleration."

"Well, couldn't that have happened to the Agnes rocket? At the moment of zero gravity the thing was weightless, but when the power built up beyond the neutral point . . . Weren't we applying a powerful force of inverse gravity to an inertialess object?"

Her expression changed, slowly and subtly. "That's exactly what we did. From the weightless condition the projectile shifted suddenly into a state of infinite acceleration—and that means it would achieve the speed of light—*without moving*."

"But how?" Farrant demanded, not understanding.

"Russ," she said excitedly, "you've hit on the essential truth. Here's me with all my mathematics, completely lost, and you, with your elementary mechanics elucidating the whole problem. And it's so simple!"

"Not to me, honey."

"Don't try to understand it,

Russ. It's a thing as abstract and unreal in its own way as the Lorentz-Fitzgerald contraction, but just as vitally true."

"But how can an object achieve the speed of light without moving?" he persisted.

"It can achieve it potentially," she said. "The entire cycle is automatic—inevitable. You establish anti-gravity, which means weightlessness. That means zero inertia, and that means infinite acceleration, whatever the applied force. The interval between the application of the force and the attainment of the speed of light is infinitesimal—a formula in differential calculus. The instant any movement is implied the speed is already infinite."

"So . . . ?"

"So at the moment you shift from zero to inverse gravity, the Lorentz-Fitzgerald contraction takes effect, and the projectile twists into the time dimension. It's as simple as that, Russ. Here we've been probing the higher mathematics of anti-gravitational fields without ever realizing the true meaning of the fundamentals. Anti-gravity and time travel are synonymous."

"You think that's the secret we weren't intended to discover?"

"I'm convinced of it."

"So what happens now?"

She came over to him and placed her hands on his shoulders. "Russ, darling, I was wrong when I said we've had a raw deal. Fate was on our side, after all."

"Is it as important as that?"

"It won't be easy," she said, smiling. "There's going to be a hell of an inquiry. But we'll convince them, you and me. And on the next Agnes test we'll be working in the light."

"And the cone device."

"It couldn't have succeeded, anyway, Russ. Whatever operated the thing must have been a direct descendant of you and me. Unless the secret of time travel had been discovered here and now, how

could it have possibly returned?"

"There are many futures," he pointed out.

She kissed him lightly. "Perhaps you're right, Russ. Which future shall we choose?"

THE END

EARTHMAN, KEEP OUT!

(Continued from page 72)

ments will have an important effect.

But did not the discovery by Jonas Salk of polio vaccine also have an enormously good impact throughout the world? And would not the discovery of a cure for cancer, or giant strides in the treatment of mental disease produce a psychological reaction which would equal or even better a space achievement? Moreover, wouldn't such conquests be more in the tradition of the goals this nation serves?

Besides, once Russia has demonstrated with Sputnik that she is a technological power in her own right, this means that subsequent achievements are bound to appear less dramatic. As the world becomes used to the fact that Russia is an advanced technological nation, it will become more blasé about Russian achievements.

This does not mean that we

must leave the conquest of space entirely to the Russians. It does mean that we should seriously assess how much we are willing to expend to keep up with Ivan, especially at cost to ourselves in other vital areas of need. Certainly, before we make heavy expenditures on escape velocity space missiles or vessels, we should make sure we have mastered all aspects of short-duration rocket flight from one point of earth to another.

Realistic priorities must be set. Before we hitch our wagon to the stars, we should certainly see to it that we have gotten sufficient use out of it on Earth. As much as many of us want to conquer space, this must remain a peripheral goal until more pressing and central matters are attended to.

Remember the octopus and the crab!

THE END

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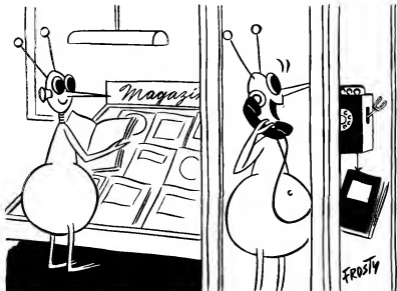
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